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SUMMER ISSUE

MAIL FOR ASPEN
By L.P. HOLMES

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GUNS OF THE MALPAIS
A Complete Wayne Morgan Novel
By LEE E. WELLS

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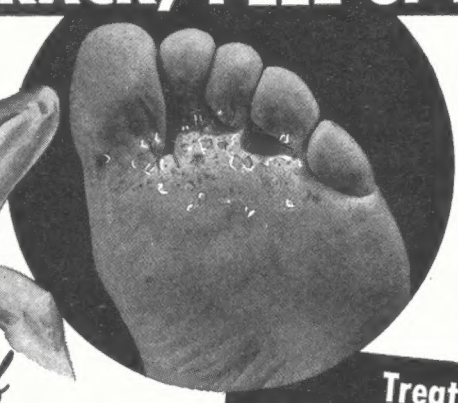

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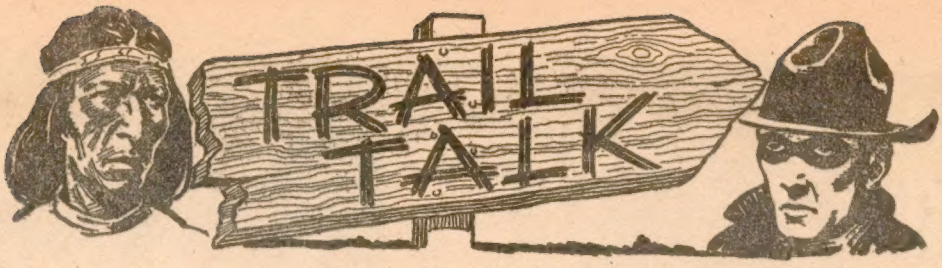

A Department for Readers Conducted by

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WELL, folks, as Spring is here, we've just got to saddle our cayuses and go for a trail ride and so we are inviting you to join us while we ride over the romantic trails of the old West and participate in a gabfest which we call Trail Talk.

We are heading our steeds over the trails toward Montana. Ever been there? It's a beautiful state, a state of wild scenic beauty, something over 147,000 square miles, and about fifteen years ago its population reached half a million. It is one of the Rocky Mountain states, the western part of the state being mountainous, the Rocky Mountains traversing from southeast to northwest and within this mountainous area is a part of the Yellowstone National Park and all of the Glacier National Park.

There are numerous peaks over ten thousand feet high. The highest peak is Granite Peak, being 12,834 ft. East of the Rockies lies the Great Plains region with an altitude of 4,000 ft. sloping down to 2,000 ft. There are a number of rivers, the most important being the Missouri and the beautiful Yellowstone.

Montana Badmen

While we are gazing at the scenery however we are going to take a peek into the lives of some of Montana's past citizens. In the early days of that country the most noted citizens were the badmen, so it is not at all unlikely that our conversation will be mostly about these Montana badmen.

Stories of the early West that have been handed down to us are not all contained in the archive of the historical societies, but many of them are handed down by word of mouth from those who were alive and perhaps eye witnesses to some episode, telling the story to their children and so on. Down come the tales of adventure, from one generation to another.

While stock-raising is an important industry, especially cattle and sheep, Montana is one of the leading copper-producing states. Other minerals include gold, silver, lead, zinc and coal.

We mention this because we will probably be riding into some of the mining towns in our quest for badmen, and if there was any place in this great country of ours where badmen were more than plentiful it was around the early Western mining camps.

"Pack Saddle" Greenough

I have a very warm personal friend, "Pack Saddle" Ben Greenough, who owns a ranch near Red Lodge, in the shadow of the Bear Tooth Mountains. Ben moved there about sixty years ago, about five years before Montana was admitted as a state.

In the early days of his residence in that country Ben discovered the ruins of an old fort-like structure which presumably was the fort of early day prospectors who built it to try and fight off the Indians while they prospected for minerals. So far as is known, none knew of the existence of the old fort ruins until it was discovered by him. He also discovered what seemed to be an abandoned robbers' roost or bandit hideout, complete with what was once a formidable defense structure with corrals for many horses.

Ben Greenough knew many of the badmen of half a century ago in that part of the West and from the sons of pioneers he has listened to stories of many thrilling adventures and so has a wealth of tales of early Western incidents.

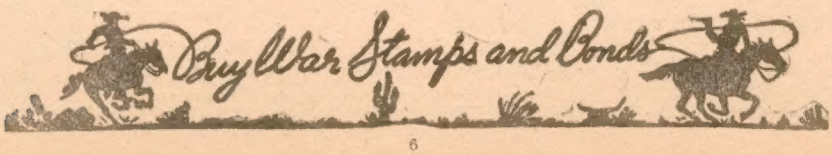
Outlaw Henry Plummer

One is the story of Henry Plummer, one of the most scheming outlaws and cutthroats that ever took a fling at the wild life of the West. At the age of about twenty Henry Plummer landed in California at a mining camp known as Nevada City.

This was back in 1853, just four years after the discovery of gold in California, and Nevada City at that hectic period was composed almost entirely of saloons, gambling houses and dance halls. Plummer, who was not a gambler, started a bakery. For a time he seemed content to bake bread, pies and rolls for the populace.

Whether it was because Plummer idolized the flashy-dressed, gun-toting gamblers, or because of the lure of gold which he saw changing hands rapidly in the big gambling games, he grew tired of the bakery business,

(Continued on page 8)



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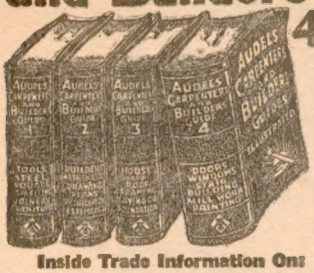

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TRAIL TALK

(Continued from page 6)

and decided to become a gambler and gunman.

He sold out his bakery and began to dazzle the city with his flashy clothes and his well polished guns. He practised patiently until he had mastered a fast draw and the ability to shoot accurately. In the meantime he had begun to set in on the gambling games and won heavily from the start, but he was smart enough to know that just luck alone was not enough for the successful gambler, as luck might turn one down at any time, and so he practised all the tricks of the regular card sharp.

Mastering the art of being a gunman and gambler Plummer longed for power, and after pistol-whipping a few of the town's citizens who interfered with his pleasure, just three years after arriving in the mining camp he was elected City Marshal.

His First Murder

Of course every gambler and gunman of the type must have a fair lady upon whom to shower gifts and affection, but in picking his lady fair, Plummer was careless and picked a married woman and when the unfortunate husband came home at exactly the wrong time the young marshal killed him, shot him dead on his own doorstep.

For this crime he received a sentence of ten years in the penitentiary, but in a short time with a good lawyer, a plea of tuberculosis and a soft hearted governor, he was pardoned and went back to Nevada City.

He did not, however, tarry long in the city, as at a dance celebrating his release from prison, one of the male attendants incurred his displeasure and was promptly rapped over the head with Plummer's gun and pronounced dead, so the former marshal lit out for parts unknown, but bobbed up again in a short time at Washoe where he held up a Wells Fargo Express stage loaded with bullion.

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He was promptly arrested, just as promptly acquitted, and in the meantime having learned that the fellow whom he had rapped over the head with his six-gun had not died after all he again returned to Nevada City. Again he killed another man over a woman, was arrested and sent to jail, but in a few days bribed someone to slip him a couple of guns, held up the turnkey and escaped, taking with him an outlaw named Mayfield whom he released from jail.

A Lawless Trail

The pair immediately stole horses, took their departure and weeks later sent back newspaper notices that they had been hanged by a Vigilance Committee in Washington Territory. This of course was to discourage pursuit.

The pair did visit Walla Walla, gambling there for a time, then Plummer with another companion he had picked up named Ridgely went to a new mining camp known as Oro Fino. Soon after their arrival, in a drunken spree in a dance hall Plummer killed the dance hall owner. Once again he won the affections of another married woman whom he took with him to Lewiston, then the capital of Montana Territory, where he spent a very profitable three weeks in gambling, but so many people became so suspicious of the many fine poker hands that Mr. Plummer seemed always to hold that the climate really became unhealthy for him and he moved on.

Next he showed up at Gold Creek, where he formed an alliance with Jack Cleveland, who was known as an expert robber specializing in holdups. For a time, then, with Plummer furnishing the ideas, and Cleveland doing the heavy work, the firm made a nice living, and then they made the mistake of both falling

(Continued on page 73)

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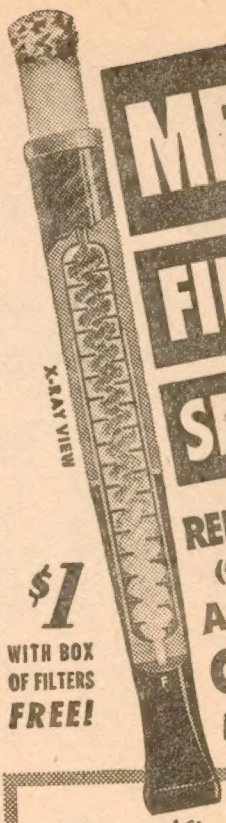

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As the Masked Rider's hands slapped to one of his twin Colts, Blue Hawk snatched his rifle from the boot. (CHAPTER II)

GUNS OF THE MALPAIS

By LEE E. WELLS

When Murderous Border Bandits Terrorize the Range, Wayne Morgan and Blue Hawk Ride into Action on a Rip-Roaring Campaign to Deliver Swift Bullet Justice to Evil Oppressors!

CHAPTER I

Six-gun Warning

NORTHWARD from the Border, the country was a bare sweep of blazing sand, repellent cactus, and low-lying broken hills. It was the devil's country, a land that seemed bare and deserted.

The hills, stretching long gaunt fingers southward disregarding man-made boundaries, were cut by a hundred canyons, broken into badlands, wide stretches of black-fanged lava beds. Evil seemed to brood in the hot sun that baked the land by day, and lurked in the deep shadows of the ghostly night. There were only a few ranches north of the Border and south of it were wandering bands of breed bandits and lurking, bloodthirsty Apaches.

Men were killed in the badlands, their lives snuffed out in swift blasts of gunfire. The silent knife and the bushwack bullet, and choking thirst between the scarce waterholes had strewn bleached bones over the area.

THE ROBIN HOOD OUTLAW DARES TO DEFY

South of the Border, men shunned this land. North of it, American ranchers had pushed in, fighting for a toe-hold in a few spreads, fanning out around the adobe town of Cavallo.

The single street of the town right now seemed devoid of life except for two horses hanging their heads at the hitch-rack before Sheriff Arch Cole's office and jail. Down the street, from an office window over the little bank, six pairs of evil eyes speculatively watched the horses. Six twisted brains saw danger to themselves and their rule.

"Arch Cole ain't goin' to do nothin' for 'em," one of them, big Hank Farger, growled.

"No," another, known as "Kansas Blacky" agreed. He rubbed a tapering finger along his strip of black mustache and his dark eyes narrowed with a dangerous glint. "But they might do something for themselves. Tex, have you had any Colt practise lately?"

Another gun-hung man turned with a twisted grin.

"None whatever, Kansas. Shore been pinin' for it, too."

"That's the Bar B and the Circle Seven talkin' to Arch," Kansas said softly. "They're delegates from the other spreads and they swing a heap of power. They'd get mighty nice funerals."

"Mighty sad for a couple of gents as young as Dan Barth and Frank Ewing," Tex sighed mockingly. "I'll see what I can do about it."

He left the room. The remaining five stared silently down the street at the sheriff's office, wishing they could hear what was being said there, though certain that Arch Cole would not give too much encouragement to the men representing the ranchers.

THE sheriff sat stone-faced behind his desk and listened. His fat, pendulous face showed no emotion as young Dan Barth spoke with swift anger.

"It's got to stop, Arch! In the last year there's been a dozen raids. We've lost some good men. Some of the boys has their nerves worn to a frazzle. They jump when a cloud sends a shadow across the ground."

"What do yuh reckon I could do?" Cole demanded flatly.

He was big, inclined to fat, and the sweat runneled down his flabby cheeks to the corners of his pinched mouth. Blue eyes were cold and distant, buried deep in rolls of flesh, angrily reddened by the sun. His thick, dimpled fingers were folded across his wide paunch, just above the heavy brass buckle of his gun-belt.

"Get after them jaspers more'n yuh have," Dan Barth snapped instantly. "If yuh don't, I reckon we ranchers will have to protect ourselves. We got to do somethin', Arch. How about it, Frank?"

Ewing nodded gravely and his fist pounded at his skinny knee.

"That's right," he agreed. "We ain't standin' still no more."

Arch Cole leaned back, blue eyes filmed yet watchful. He weighed Dan Barth. The young owner of the Bar B would be just the man to make good his threat. Six feet of lean muscle and bone, long arms that could move with amazing swiftness, that was Dan Barth. His face was long, tanned an even deep brown. Hazel eyes, set well apart by a long, straight nose, had a direct, honest look. Curly brown hair swept back from his wide forehead.

He paced before Cole's scarred desk with an impatient, pantherish stride, hand brushing the gun in the tooled holster. Cole's glance shifted to Frank Ewing, owner of the Circle Seven, the largest of the spreads. Gangling, horse-faced, mild Frank Ewing would be easily handled. He would take excuses. Cole sighed.

"Dan, I just ain't had enough men to cover every rat-hole along the Border. Shore's I'm down by the Circle Seven, them sidewinders shoots up yore spread. I move up yore way and they hit Bledso's Hat."

Barth stopped pacing, turned and leaned over the desk. His hazel eyes blazed.

"Then is it all right if we form our own guards? Frank and me was to ask yuh that. We don't want to do nothing illegal, but we shore can't be losin' men all the time."

Cole seemed to consider the proposition. Actually a cold chill of fear made his broad back tingle.

There were six hard-eyed gents in Cavallo who wouldn't like armed ranchers.

"Dan," he finally said, "I reckon yuh'd better think things over. Give me more of a chance. I'll hire more deputies, scatter 'em around and we're shore to get a line on them bandidos. Yuh tell yore rancher friends to hold off a while. Ain't no use getting proddy and a hump in yore back."

"We ain't." Barth shook his head slowly, wide lips pressed tightly. "But somethin' has to be done."

"It will be," Arch Cole answered fervently. "I'll ride myself and my boys to a frazzle. But once yuh give a cowpoke a rifle gun and he thinks he's part of the law, Dan, and yuh run a chance of trouble. Ain't that right, Frank?"

Ewing's calm gray eyes swung up to Dan. He stood up slowly.

"Let's string along with Arch for a few more weeks, Dan," he gave in. "If he don't do nothin' then we can move ourselves."

THE VICIOUS "SIX TRAILS TO BOOT HILL"!

Barth faced Cole. "Yuh make that promise, Arch?"

"Yuh can bet yore last ragged soogans on it, Dan," Cole replied heartily. A flicker of relief showed in his piggy blue eyes. "Yuh won't have no cause to complain."

Dan Barth straightened from the desk, sighed and then shrugged.

"We'll let the trail go that way, then. See yuh around, Arch."

He walked out the door and Frank Ewing followed him. Arch Cole remained seated behind his desk and the two ranchers didn't

WAYNE MORGAN

see the flick of anger and hate across his fat face. It was gone in an instant.

Outside, the sun struck with the force of a club. The two men pulled their hat brims lower over their squinted eyes and walked with jingling spurs to their horses. Swinging into saddle, they rode out to Cavallo at a slow pace. Unknown to the two, five men watched them with grins of evil triumph on their faces.

Dan Barth and Frank Ewing rode west and north out of Cavallo, heading for a break in the wide arch of low hills. The arid plain slowly wheeled behind them and just before sundown they began to mount the slopes up into the pass. They had said little to one another, slumping shoulders against the beat of the sun. A breeze stirred through the pass and Barth straightened.

The trail wound into the hills, cutting around the shoulders in wide loops, plunging into narrow canyons and then dropping into narrow, arid valleys, climbing again. Beyond the arc of the hills lay the ranching country, not far away now.

They had climbed into the last hill saddle and were threading through the canyon. Ewing rolled a cigarette as he rode along, his calm eyes resting sleepily on the trail ahead.

"Dan," he said slowly, "I reckon yuh're plumb mad at me, knucklin' in to Arch back there."

"Not mad, Frank," Barth answered and chuckled wryly. "It's just that I'm right galled settin' around doing nothing."

"My pa used to tell me to make haste slowly," Ewing said. "I never forgot—"

He broke off short. His hand plunged down to his holster and he jerked his horse around. A Colt blasted, the roar sounding thunderous in the narrow walls of the canyon. Dan Barth's head snapped up. Horsemen milled on the trail before him, hard-eyed, thin-lipped men bearing the stamp of the outlaw.

"Grab sky, Barth!" a hoarse voice yelled.

Ewing clutched his saddle-horn. His head sagged forward and his gangly body was wrenched with a choking, burbling cough. He started to slump to one side. Barth swore, threw a quick glance over his shoulder. More horsemen rode around a bend in the canyon. He was surrounded.

He held up his arms. Ewing coughed again, words mumbled from his lips, muffled and choked. Barth did not dare to help the man, for any move on his part would bring a hail of deadly lead. Ewing's shirt front stained crimson, slowly spread. His knuckles showed white where he gripped the saddle-horn.

Abruptly he fell, striking the ground like a limp bundle of rags. One boot twisted around, held upright by the stirrup. His horse pranced skittishly and then stood still. Barth stared down at his friend, face white, lips trembling with anger.

The renegades came closer, the ring tightening. They were of the Border breed, mixed bloods, Apaches, white men whose scarred and twisted faces were scored with all the evils of the Border. A big man pushed his horse through the ring and grinned at Barth.

"Right sudden, ain't it? Take a good look, Barth. Yuh're goin' to be like that before long."

Dan Barth's hazel eyes blazed upward and his wide lips curled. He still held his hands high, but his voice held a whiplash of scorn.

"Texas Bowen, I always figgered yuh a sidewindin' back-shooter!"

Bowen didn't seem to mind. He was a large man, his bulk overflowing the saddle. But none of it was fat. His arms and legs were like thick tree trunks and the crossed gun-belts girded a stomach hard with muscles. His head was bullet-shaped, set low between wide, hulking shoulders. Shallow black eyes set deep under a low, coarse brow glittered with malignant humor. His high-arched nose had been broken and flattened, twisting to one side and flattened above the thick, wide lips. High cheek bones suggested just a touch of Indian.

He spoke a curt word to one of the men and Barth's six was snaked from the holster. "Texas" Bowen dismounted and stood over Frank Ewing. The rancher moaned, gasped, and then his body arched high and fell flaccid.

"Done cashed his chips," Bowen grunted. "That's part of the job done."

"I'm the other part, I reckon," Dan Barth said coldly.

Bowen looked up and grinned widely. "Yuh got a heap of savvy, Barth. Yore rancher friends got too nosy about somethin' that ain't none of their business. Yore body and Frank's here will be a warnin'."

Barth said nothing. Bowen touched Frank Ewing's body with his boot toe, then swung into saddle. His grin became wider.

"I reckon this is as good a place as any for yuh to be found dead, Barth. I'll shore see yuh get a nice tombstone."

With slow deliberation his hand moved to his six. He lifted it out of the holster and his thick thumb deliberately dogged back the hammer. The click sounded loud. Dan Barth braced himself, but his face showed no fear, only blazing contempt.

CHAPTER II

Trouble in the Malpais

THE shot that had killed Frank Ewing sent a sharp, flat sound over the malpais. A rider and his Indian companion drew instant rein when they heard it, alert and tense. With one accord black stallion and gray horse turned toward the rim of the distant canyon. They drew rein at the top of the wall.

Had any of the renegade band looked upward, they would have seen a magnificent black stallion lined against the sky. In the saddle, straight and supple, sat a tall rider. Horse and man sat silent and still like a magnificent statue.

A black sombrero shadowed the rider's lean face, and keen blue eyes blazed downward through a domino mask that seemed itself a part of the shadows. A strong mouth and firm taut chin showed below the mask. He wore a black cloak slung from his wide shoulders.

The waning light of day made faint reflections on the blue steel of the heavy Colts holstered snugly to each lean hip. He sat easily in the saddle, looking down on the men in the canyon.

This was the famous Robin Hood of the ranges, the outlaw, the Masked Rider whose name was whispered awesomely over the West. His name, mentioned around chuck-wagon fires, in the bunkhouses and the saloons of cowtowns, started heated arguments. There were a thousand stories about the Masked Rider, a few of them true, many more of them false and distorted. But always men spoke of this fighting fury on horseback who battled to help the oppressed and the downtrodden, though he himself was counted as an outlaw.

Though young, his past was a sealed book. Those firm lips never spoke of it even to Blue Hawk, the Yaqui Indian who was his constant companion and friend. Even his real name was unknown to all but himself. Still, for all the tales, no one knew what had caused the Masked Rider to become a Robin Hood outlaw. But whatever his past, there were many who would give their lives for him because he had ridden to their aid when their need was greatest.

With eyes hard and glittering, Morgan and the Yaqui waited as the bandits swept down the canyon (CHAPTER VII)

He had a keen brain and a good education, though he fell naturally into the slow drawl of the West he loved, particularly assuming the easy manners of a cowboy when he took on the rôle of Wayne Morgan, a wandering ranny.

He was a good cowhand, convincing in the rôle, for he had proved time and again that he could be top hand on any spread.

"One against a dozen, Blue Hawk," the Masked Rider said, low.

The Indian looked down into the canyon, impassive and quiet.

"Breeds, Senor. Bad men. Killing soon."

The Indian looked down into the canyon impassive and quiet.

The Indian's long dark hair almost touched his shoulders. It was tied back from his face by a bright-colored band of cloth. He was dressed in white shirt and trousers with a sash around his waist in which he carried a sheath-knife.

He wore no six-gun, but there was a rifle in the saddle-boot beneath his right leg. He rode a wiry gray that looked small beside the black stallion, Midnight.

The Yaqui's dark eyes cut to the Masked Rider and lighted in a silent question. He was devoted to the tall outlaw whose close friend he had been for many years. Blue Hawk, educated in a Mission school, spoke English fluently, though his words were clipped and his sentences short.

Down below the two riders, a big man they did not as yet know was Texas Bowen had remounted. The Masked Rider saw him drag out his Colt and dog back the hammer. The evil, twisted grin on the man's face told the Masked Rider all he needed to know. This was to be deliberate murder.

As Bowen lined the six, the Masked Rider's hand slapped to one of his twin Colts. They blurred out and up with the speed of light. At the same moment, Blue Hawk whirled his horse away from the rim, snatching the rifle from the foot. The Masked Rider's slug burned a hot brand along Bowen's arm. His fingers flew open and the Colt dropped.

With a curse of pain and fear, Bowen twisted around. The bandits jerked surprised, stunned faces toward the rim of the canyon. They saw the masked, cloaked figure. Bowen's mouth dropped open.

"The Masked Rider!" he exclaimed.

"Drop your sixes!" the Masked Rider called in a deep, ringing voice. "I'm takin' cards in this deal."

Bowen gulped, then his eyes narrowed. There was just one man up there and he had a dozen. His courage returned in a rush. He raked spurs, jumping his horse.

"Get that jasper! Blast him down!"

RENEGADE sixes jumped from leather. The Masked Rider's guns spoke. A man dropped, a second threw his hands high over his head and tumbled from saddle. Lead whistled upward, seeking the cloaked figure. But the Masked Rider was a hard target to hit.

Midnight kept prancing, moving. The masked man's blue Colts spat flame and death into the canyon. Dan Barth suddenly realized that none of the renegades paid any attention to him. He jumped from the saddle and scooped up a fallen Colt. A breed saw him, yelled, and snapped a shot that sang close to Barth's cheek. Barth knocked the man out of leather, whirled the captured gun spitting into the band.

The blue eyes behind the black mask marked Bowen's swift progress. One of the Colt's shifted slightly, belched smoke and flame. A bandit spurred fast down the canyon, cutting between the Masked Rider and his target.

The bandit rolled to the earth but Bowen kept going.

Then a rifle came into the fight. From up in the rocks Blue Hawk took swift, cool aim into the canyon. He dropped two men before the bandits fled for their lives and disappeared down the canyon in a whirl of dust. Only Dan Barth remained alive, there, the Colt in his hand, hammer clicking on empty chambers.

"They're gone, hombre!" the Masked Rider called down.

He whirled the stallion away from the rim and disappeared.

Barth stared around at Frank Ewing's huddled form and the sprawled figures of the dead bandits. He was still a bit dazed by the suddenness of it all, and uncertain. He heard the ring of steel shoes on rock, then Midnight came around the trail. The Masked Rider dismounted, the firm mouth beneath the mask smiling and friendly.

"I reckon yuh'd better tell me about the ruckus," he said.

Barth looked hard at the man. He liked what he saw under the black mask and he owed his life to this famous outlaw. He recalled tales he had heard in which other men had been saved by those same swift guns that now rested in the twin holsters.

"That was Texas Bowen and some of his gun pards," he said. "They had me and Frank slated for Boot Hill. Yuh saved me, but Frank shore reached the end of his tally string."

The Masked Rider swung out of the saddle and stood tall and straight before him. His dark boots were coated with the dust of the long trails. The lips broke in a smile that invited confidence.

"There's always some reason for an ambush, friend," the Masked Rider suggested.

"There's plenty reason here," Dan Barth answered bitterly. "Yuh rode into a range that's plumb ready to explode, hombre."

"I've done that before," the Masked Rider said quietly.

Barth pushed his hat back. Daylight faded rapidly but still the long purple shadows that crept into the canyon could not erase the lines of worry from his face.

"Just beyond the pass here," he said, "is the ranchin' country. There's five-six spreads over there and there ain't none of us but what has to fight everything Nature throws against us. But we were winnin' the fight till this trouble comes up."

"Bandits?" the Masked Rider asked.

"Yeah. We can't figger 'em out. They'll hit a spread at night and throw lead fast and hard. They'll ring a spread and keep blue whistlers goin' through the windows and doors all night till just before dawn. Then they ride away."

"Losin' cows?" the Masked Rider put in quickly.

Barth shook his head. "Up till a month or two ago, not any. That's what makes the whole thing look loco. Two weeks ago they hit my spread. They caught Charley Weeks, one of my hands, between the cook shack and the bunkhouse and killed him. There wasn't a whole pane of glass left anywhere's on the ranch. Three of my hands had bullet-holes in their hide. Just before dawn, the jaspers rode off. They done the same thing to the Hat and to Frank Ewing's Circle Seven. There ain't no sense to it. Up till a short while back, they didn't rustle a single cow."

THE Masked Rider's blue eyes cut to the evil faces of the dead men.

"These men are killers, for gain of some kind," he said flatly. "Yuh must have some idea."

"We figgered they was hooked up with the Six Trails to Boot Hill," Dan Barth answered slowly. "I'm shore now the raids have somethin' to do with them gents since Texas Bowen showed his face."

"Who are the Six Trails to Boot Hill?" the Masked Rider asked curiously.

"Six men in Cavallo who run the whole country," Barth answered bitterly. "Six gunslicks that ain't been downed yet, six renegades that make better men pay tribute."

"Who are they?"

"Yuh saw Texas Bowen. He's the trouble jumper for the outfit. He's got a touchy trigger and a proddy temper. Then there's Hank Farger who owns the freight line at Cavallo. We got to get our supplies shipped in through him. There's Kansas Blacky, a lawbook waddy who's as sneaky as a sidewinder."

"Gunman, lawyer, freighter," the Masked Rider mused. "They shore take in a heap of territory."

"There's more," Barth said disgustedly. "There's Hard Pearson who owns the Bandido Saloon and controls the bank. Chips Jason is a hideout gun-killer who runs the games at the Bandido. The last is John Trego, runs the Rafter T, though no one has seen him workin' cows. They rule the roost in these parts."

"Just six men," the Masked Rider suggested. "Seems like six men couldn't do much if you ranchers banded together.

DAN BARTH laughed, a short bark with no mirth in it. He pointed to Frank Ewing.

"There's yore answer, hombre. We ranchers did get together and we decided to do somethin' about these raids. We went to the sheriff, Arch Cole. We didn't get nowhere and was on our way home when Texas killed Frank, tried to get me. If we gunned Bowen down, Farger wouldn't haul anything in for us. Hard Pearson would see the bank foreclosed on our notes. All of us owes money. Them six would crack the whip. Arch Cole is their man, shore as shootin' Kansas Blacky ain't been known to lose a case before Judge Zimmer. We're hog-tied."

The Masked Rider stood silent a moment, then turned and swung into saddle. He smiled down at Barth, but there was something grim in the movement of the firm lips. "I reckon I'll be busy in Cavallo."

"Yuh mean yuh'll help us!" Barth exclaimed.

"I'm lookin' around," the Masked Rider replied. "Where's yore spread?"

"The Bar B, the first ranch yuh come to after the trail hits the valley floor."

"I think you and the others had better start payin' gun wages," the Masked Rider said slowly. "Yuh might need a man who's good with his cutters."

Dan Barth shook his head. "I don't like it."

"Yuh won't like outlaw lead either," the Masked Rider snapped.

He neck-reined his horse and waved his hand in farewell. A touch of his knees and Midnight sprang forward, to disappear in a cloud of dust down the canyon.

Dan Barth remained still for a short while and then wearily bent to pick up Frank Ewing's body. His face was drawn and grim as he lashed the body across the saddle of his horse. But there was a single ray of hope as he thought of the Masked Rider. . . .

The Masked Rider rode up the canyon, then turned Midnight toward a steep slope that led to the rim. The powerful stallion took the ascent in his stride, great muscles rippling smoothly beneath the black satin of its coat. The Masked Rider drew rein and gave the call of the mountain lion. Silent as a shadow, Blue Hawk appeared, leading their string of horses.

"Trouble, Blue Hawk," the Masked

Rider snapped. "We'll stay around Cavallo for a while."

"Yes, Senor," Blue Hawk replied quietly. "Big gunman leave his men. Ride to the town."

"Bowen, eh?" the Masked Rider mused. "Probably reportin' to his friends. Let's find a hideout and get to work. This is a renegade range, Blue Hawk, and trouble is riding in."

"We help." Blue Hawk nodded. "That is good. Water-hole north. Malpais all around narrow canyon. Good grass for horses. No one will look there."

The two men rode off into the darkness, the Yaqui striking straight for the distant water-hole. Before the night was half gone, Blue Hawk had found the hideout. The horses were staked out to graze. The black coat, mask and hat of the Masked Rider was hidden in a bed-roll. His alter ego, Wayne Morgan, wandering cowboy, sat before the little fire, preparing a delayed meal.

He spoke in a drawling voice to Blue Hawk and his blue eyes were mild, almost sleepy. The Indian listened closely, nodding now and then. His black eyes gleamed in the firelight.

"I keep a good watch at Cavallo, Senor," he finally said.

"Good." Morgan grinned. "I reckon we'd better turn in. Tomorrow might be right strenuous."

The fire burned low, a little pinpoint of light in the wide expanse of the badlands. Wayne Morgan slept rolled up in his blankets. Blue Hawk checked the horses and silently returned to the fire. He dozed lightly, awakening instantly at the sound of each little noise.

Before dawn, Wayne Morgan had mounted a hammerhead roan, one of the five horses the two men always took with them. He gave last instructions to Blue Hawk and rode slowly out of the hideout and headed for the ranches beyond the hills.

He was a big man, a little over six feet tall. He rode with the easy slouch of the wandering cowboy, gray Stetson pushed back over his dark, close-cropped hair. A blue flannel shirt covered his deep chest and his levis were worn and dark.

Crossed gun-belts were looped around his slender waist, the holsters tied low to the thighs by leather thongs. The Colt .45s were matched and showed plenty of use. But there was nothing distinctive about them, blue-steeled weapons with smooth, worn handles.

He rode out of the hills and down the trail into the valley. His mild blue eyes missed nothing and he noticed that the graze was sparse. Off in the distance, he saw the raw cut of an irrigation ditch. The Cavallo ranchers were determined men, Morgan thought.

CHAPTER III

Fighting Pay

WAYNE MORGAN pulled up the roan before a narrow trail that cut away from the road. A leaning sign carried the legend "Bar B." Morgan turned the roan into the narrow trail and followed it. It dipped down into a wide swale, surprisingly green in this country of little water. The few, low buildings of the Bar B were strung along a stream that cut through the center of the swale. The ranch did not look rich, but it was neat, the buildings kept in excellent repair. A few horses stood in a pole corral.

Morgan rode into the yard, nodded to a couple of hands who watched him warily from the bunkhouse door. The waddy swung out of saddle.

"I'm looking for a gent named Barth—Dan Barth," he announced.

"Who sent yuh?" one of the men demanded.

Morgan's mild blue eyes cut to him and his drawl became more pronounced.

"I reckon I sent myself, hombre."

The man stiffened, then his glance cut to the crossed gun-belts. Abruptly he swung away from the door and across the bare packed yard toward the ranchhouse. Morgan waited, noticing that the remaining waddy kept suspicious watch on him.

Dan Barth came out of the ranchhouse, and the waddy pointed to Morgan. Barth came forward, suspicion in every move.

"I'm Barth," he said. "What brings yuh to the Bar B?"

"A job," Morgan drawled. "I'm right fair as a cowhand."

"I'm not hirin'," Barth snapped. "None of the spreads out this way are."

Morgan remained standing beside the roan. He patted one of the Colts with his hand.

"These ain't here for show, mister. I heard yuh was in need of 'em."

A look of disgust and anger swept over Barth's young face. He made a violent negative gesture with his hand.

"Yuh read sign wrong, pilgrim. I never hired a gun hand. I ain't plannin' to now. Yuh'd better ride to Cavallo if yuh want that kind of a job."

He started to turn away but Morgan's drawl pulled him up short.

"Do yuh know a gent that rides around with a black mask over his face? Tall gent in a black cloak?"

"The Masked Rider!" Barth wheeled around, eyes wide. "Are you—?" He left the question dangling.

"Do I look like him?" Morgan chuckled

easily. "I run onto the gent in the badlands over there just last night. Scared the daylights out of me until I found out he wasn't no bandido from south of the Border. We talked some."

"Come in the house," Barth said and turned on his heel.

Morgan grinned at the two surprised waddies and followed the boss into the house. Barth opened the door and Morgan stepped into a light and clean kitchen. Barth waved toward the table.

"Set down. I got coffee on the stove." He hustled around the room, poured the black brew into cups, then sat down himself. He stared straight and hard at Morgan.

"Who are yuh?"

"Wayne Morgan's the handle. I been wanderin' a heap and I moseyed down this way. Met the Masked Rider gent last night and he was plumb anxious I come and talk to yuh. Mentioned the Bar B and said to ask for a young gent named Dan Barth." Morgan grinned. "He said yuh might be sort of short and proddy in yore talk."

Barth flushed. "We're worried down this way. There's all sorts of trouble that ain't got sense to it. We've had some gunsmoke and done some buryin'. Strangers ain't exactly welcome."

"Shucks, I reckon yuh do need me!" Morgan exclaimed. "I come right reasonable, considerin'."

Dan Barth fell silent, staring moodily out the window. He seemed to be struggling to adjust himself to the need for hire gunhawks. His fist clenched around the coffee cup handle until the knuckles showed white. At last he sighed, surrendered, but still the word came hard.

"All right, Morgan. Yuh're hired. Join the boys at the bunkhouse like yuh was an ordinary hand."

"I don't hire that way," Morgan interrupted calmly. "I got to know what the trouble's all about. I become the fightin' man of the outfit with a free hand to go and come wherever the sign leads me."

Barth's lips tightened and he was on the point of shaking his head. Then he changed his mind.

"All right. I'll accept them terms. Yuh got the run of the spread and no questions asked. As for findin' out about the trouble, grab yore hat and ride with me."

HE BANGED his coffee mug down on the table and arose. He strapped a gunbelt around his waist while Wayne Morgan watched him lazily from the table.

The two men left the house. Barth stopped suddenly and pointed to a row of old bottles up-ended on a picket fence.

"I don't buy a hoss without lookin' at its teeth. Let's see what yuh can do."

Morgan shrugged, smiled. His hands

With the renegades behind them, the Masked Rider, Helen Bledso and Blue Hawk rode swiftly away (CHAPTER XI)

flashed down to his Colts and they started flaming as they blurred upward. The bottles shattered in sprays of glass from left to right until both Colts were emptied. Finally Morgan up-tilted the smoking barrels and arched his brow at Barth.

"How's my teeth?"

"Blasted good, I'd say," Barth replied in a gusty, awed tone. "I never even saw them cutters leave leather. Let's ride."

As they rode out of the yard, two waddies stared round-eyed after them. One cleared his throat, gulped, and nudged the other with his elbow.

His voice was a stunned, surprised whisper.

"And I got proddy with that gent! I reckon I'd better lay down. I feel plumb weak."

Dan Barth led the way in silence, cutting across the Bar B range away from the hills. They had ridden several miles when Barth pulled up on a high ridge. His long arm pointed south.

"Yuh can look into Mexico down there. Just north of here is Trego's Rafter T. Straight ahead is Bledso's Hat. That's where we're headin'. Yuh'll savvy more about Trego and Bledso before long."

Without further word, he urged his horse on and Morgan followed. They dropped off the ridge, went through a gate in a line fence and headed steadily westward. Soon they could see the buildings of the Hat, a larger spread than the Bar B.

Several saddled horses waited in the yard, and Barth's eyes lighted when he saw them. He dismounted and Morgan followed him to the house. They entered a small room lined with ranchers from all the neighboring spreads. They were a grim-faced lot, gun-hung and proddy. Morgan saw that at a glance. He didn't miss the suspicious hard gleam of their eyes as they looked at him.

"This is Wayne Morgan, gents," Barth stated. "I hired him to take care of the Bar B gun-slingin'."

A little ripple went through the men and their eyes cut back to Wayne. An old rancher twisted around in his chair. He was small, wiry, as tough as a thin string of rawhide. His thin face was lined with a thousand wrinkles but his brown eyes were sharp and bright as he looked Morgan over. He seemed to like what he saw. He spat into the sawdust-lined can and growled at Barth.

"If it takes gunmen, use 'em. Frank Ewing would shore have been better off with a few around."

A silence fell on the room, and in a few moments a girl came in. She was tall and dark and graceful, with clear brown eyes that went instantly to Dan Barth. The young rancher's face softened.

Morgan saw instantly the resemblance between the girl and the old man in the chair. She had the same high forehead, smooth, and a golden tan. Her face was inclined to be thin, the high cheekbones accenting its length. The chin was small and pointed, but the lips were wide and generous, a deep red and smiling.

"I'm sorry about Frank," she said to Dan Barth. "We'll miss him a lot."

"Thanks, Helen," Barth murmured. "He was my best friend. I intend to get Texas Bowen's scalp for his killin'."

"Tell us about Arch Cole," the old man cut in. "How did you and Frank come out with him?"

"No good," Barth replied shortly. "Didn't yuh expect that, Mr. Bledso? I told yuh it would be a waste of time to go to Cole. He makes a heap of promises and does nothin'. I know why now, since Bowen has tipped his hand. Arch is afraid to move."

"Can't blame him," a man against the wall muttered. "Them Six Trails is tough hombres."

"They're behind this." Dan Barth swung around. "We've got to fight 'em anyway we can. We got to stop these raids. None of us is safe from a bushwhack bullet unless we do."

Old Hal Bledso scratched his chin. "That's a right smart order, Dan. All of us owes money to the Cavallo bank. All of us buys from the Cavallo stores and they depend on Hank Farger to bring in the supplies. We could get our money and food cut off mighty short."

DAN BARTH said nothing. He stood tall and straight, breathing deeply, his fist knotted over the handle of his six-gun in the holster. Morgan saw his trapped look.

Old Hal Bledso spat again.

"We got to protect ourselves, that's shore," he said. "But we can't ruin ourselves doin' it. Dan, yuh say Texas Bowen killed Ewing and was going to salivate you but the Masked Rider saved yore hide. Bowen wanted the rest of us to mind our own business and accept the raids. Why? There ain't been nothin' stole and them Six Trails don't move unless there's dinero somewheres around."

"We've lost a few head," a rancher broke in.

"Shore, just lately. But we don't know that the Six Trails had 'em rustled. Could be bandits from over the Border."

Morgan cleared his throat and every eye swung to him. He hitched at his gun-belt.

"I ain't known in Cavallo. None of these gents yuh speak about know I'm hired to Barth unless one of yuh spill the news."

"Yuh want it that way?" Bledso asked.

"Seems like I could ride into Cavallo and find out a heap of things that you gents can't. I figger it's worth a try."

Bledso nodded slowly and looked at his

friends around the room, a silent questioning of each one. His keen brown eyes came back to Morgan.

"Yuh're elected, friend. When'll yuh report?"

"As soon as I can, to Barth. He'll bring the word to yuh."

"I'm ridin' to Cavallo myself," Barth said evenly. "I'm havin' it out with Texas Bowen."

"No, Dan!" the girl exclaimed. She rushed to the young rancher, grabbing his arms in a fierce, possessive gesture. "He'll kill you! You can't!"

"I got to," Dan Barth said softly.

"Yuh forget yuh hired me on my terms," Morgan quietly put in. "I'm doin' the gunfightin' for the Bar B. You ride to Cavallo and I'll wing yuh myself. Savvy?"

Barth's face blazed angrily and he took a half step forward. Morgan met his challenging look. Helen Bledso still clung to his arm. Barth halted, looked defeated.

"All right. This time I'll wait. But not long."

"Yuh'll have yore innin' with Bowen," Morgan promised. He glanced at Bledso. "Then I'm ridin' right now. I'll report when I can."

Bledso's voice stopped him at the door.

"Fast with yore Colts, son?"

"Faster'n most," Morgan answered.

"It ain't enough," Bledso warned. "Cavallo's mean for lead poisonin'. Hope yuh get back."

Morgan left and closed the door.

Morgan mounted the roan, swung around and rode out of the Hat yard. He hit the back trail, riding at an easy gait that would place him in Cavallo by early afternoon. When he was out of sight of the Hat buildings, he drew rein. The call of the mountain lion lifted across the range. Instantly a horseman came out of a high clump of bushes and came toward him. Blue Hawk rode up and waited impassively for Morgan to speak.

"We got us a job," Morgan said. "I'm gun boss for the Bar B and the other ranchers."

"Good, Senor," Blue Hawk said without surprise. "I ride to Cavallo, pick up trail of Texas Bowen."

"Anything happen?"

"Word is at Cavallo the Masked Rider has ridden into the country. Sheriff claims he will capture the outlaw and collect the bounty. Bowen saw his friends."

"Bowen did, huh? Where'd he meet 'em?"

"In office over the bank. It is a lawyer named Kansas Blacky. There is a back stairway, Senor."

"Good. We'll see what else we can learn in Cavallo."

Morgan touched the roan and headed toward the hills. They had ridden into the pass when Morgan pointed off toward the hideout.

"Bring Midnight to the western edge of the town," he told Blue Hawk. "After sundown I'll meet yuh."

"Yes, Senor," the Yaqui answered quietly and rode off into the badlands.

CHAPTER IV

Cavallo Cavvy

MORGAN remained on the main trail. Early in the afternoon he drew rein just outside Cavallo. It wasn't much of a town, a single street lined with adobe buildings all squat and one-storied.

Except the bank. It was of frame construction. Morgan's eyes raised to its windows on the second floor. He loosened his Colts slightly, then at a soft word the roan ambled forward down the street. Morgan, slouched deeply in the saddle, looked like a lazy, wanwering cowpoke going nowhere in particular. But his blue eyes did not miss the interest he created in some gun-hung loafers at the freight station.

He saw the sign of the Bandido Saloon and turned the roan to the hitch-rack. He made a show of dusting off his clothes, then pushed through the bat doors. The room was long and low, comparatively cool after the sun-heated street. At the moment, there were few customers.

A gambler with blazing, heavy-lidded eyes looked up briefly, took in Morgan with one glance, then forgot him for the solitaire layout on the table before him. His face was thin and narrow and an unhealthy white that the sun would never touch. His fingers were swift as they handled the cards. Morgan placed him as "Chips" Jason, one of the Six Trails.

"What'll it be, cowboy?" a harsh booming voice asked from behind the counter.

Morgan swung to the bar, placed a dusty, booted foot on the rail and pushed back his gray hat.

"Make it one, good but cheap, and some information, amigo."

The bartender had a granite-heavy face, square-cut, the jowls like rough-hewn rocks. His lips were a thin, bloodless trap across the rocky chin, the eyes a washed blue and as cold as twin Colt barrels. He wore a white apron, but his flowered vest was of expensive material and the shirt looked soft and tailor-made. No ordinary bartender this, but probably "Hard" Pearson, the owner.

"The drink can be filled pronto," the man said in a raspy boom. "But I ain't so shore about the information and who's askin'."

Morgan sighed and held the whisky glass to the light.

"This is shore the most suspicious range I

was ever on! West of here I ran into a bunch of jaspers that was right proddy. They sort of figgured I couldn't ride where I pleased."

"That's possible," Hard clipped. He took Morgan's coin and flipped it into the cash box. "West of here, eh? Must have been some of the Bar B or Circle Seven boys. Their boss got salivated lately."

"No wonder they was hostile." Morgan downed the drink. "But I still ain't got no information."

"And I still ain't got yore handle, pilgrim."

"Wayne Morgan, ridin' the chuckline and takin' it easy on the way. Ain't there no chances for a job in these parts?"

"Cow punchin', no," Hard Pearson peered over the bar at Morgan's crossed gun-belts. "Lead-slingin' mebbe."

"Range war?" Morgan asked, surprise in his tone.

Chips Jason ruffled the cards with an angry flat slapping sound. His low voice carried clearly almost the whole length of the room.

"Curiosity, stranger, is somethin' yuh ain't got unless there's sixes behind 'em."

Morgan turned easily, a friendly smile on his face.

"I learned that a long time back, amigo. But I ain't askin' nothin' personal. Just lookin' for a job, punchin' or shootin', since my Colts has plumb filled everyone's eyes."

"Can yuh use 'em?" Pearson asked.

"A little."

Hard Pearson shot a quick glance to Chips Jason and seemed to get a silent answer. His heavy voice did not become more friendly, but made a flat statement.

"South and west of here is the Rafter T. Ask for John Trego. He'll see what yuh can do with guns. He might need yuh, might not."

"South and west," Morgan mused aloud. "That Rafter T must be plumb against the Border, and he's hirin'.guns."

"Yuh don't think about the Rafter T, hombre. Yuh ride out there for a job or yuh don't—either way."

"Touchy, ain't yuh?" Morgan asked.

"Nope, just plumb tired of hearin' yore jaws snap together. Want another drink?"

"Yes, and one more question. Has this town a hotel?"

Hard Pearson allowed a fleeting grin to touch his somber, harsh lips.

"Yuh got soogans. That's the hotel."

MORGAN accepted the second glass and carried it to one of the tables. He idly riffled a deck of cards and dealt a solitaire lay-out. Neither Pearson nor Jason paid any more attention to him.

The afternoon passed slowly. A few customers came in, treating the bartender and gambler with noticeable politeness.

Morgan finally left the saloon and wandered along the street. He found a little eating place and ate a lonely meal. He asked the Mexican proprietor about jobs, certain that every move of his would be checked as long as he was in Cavallo. Finished, he returned to the saloon. Hard Pearson looked up at him from the bar.

"Back again?"

"For a while. I'm puttin' off them soogans and the open air as long as I can. In the mornin' I'll ride out to the Rafter T yuh mentioned."

Pearson grunted disinterestedly and continued to polish glasses. Chips Jason was gone. Morgan returned to his table. He was half-way through his next solitaire game when Texas Bowen shoved through the doors. Morgan gave him a lazy glance and continued to place the cards. Bowen stared hard at the stranger waddy, then turned to the bar.

"Blacky's place, Hard," he said low, but the words carried to Morgan.

"Get Shear to relieve me," Pearson snapped and Texas left the saloon.

A few minutes later a red-faced man came panting in, hurriedly took the apron that Pearson tossed to him. The saloon-keeper left the bar and disappeared into a rear room. Morgan kept playing solitaire, finishing the game, ordering a drink, and starting another. Ten minutes passed and Morgan impatiently slapped down the cards.

"Can't even cheat to win," he said, and grinned at the bartender. "Good night, amigo."

He strolled out the doors, mounted the roan and turned down the street, riding slowly. But once beyond Cavallo, he whipped erect and searched the back trail. Keen eyes cut into the darkness and the lips had lost their smile. Satisfied that no one had seen or followed him, Morgan gave the call of a mountain lion. Instantly the answer came from his left and Morgan spurred that way.

Blue Hawk was a silent shadow and Midnight stamped impatiently. Morgan vaulted from the saddle, sailing his gray Stetson toward the Yaqui, who deftly caught it. The bed-roll behind the cantle produced the black hat and cloak. The mask was fitted over the face and the keen blue eyes of the Masked Rider blazed through the slits.

He swung onto Midnight and rode swiftly toward Cavallo, avoiding the road. Just outside the town, he halted. The dark shapes of the stores and houses were dimly lined against the light from the street. The bank building towered above the rest. A touch of the knees and Midnight went slowly ahead.

The Masked Rider halted the stallion not far from the bank. A light glowed from a corner window and the Masked Rider's keen eyes instantly found the back door of which Blue Hawk had spoken. A faint smile touched

the grim lips. He slipped from the saddle and cat-footed into the shadow of the building. He waited, listening.

Approaching the door, he silently tested it. A twist of the knob and a slight pressure and the door swung open on a steep dark stairway. The Masked Rider threw a quick glance over his shoulder, then slipped inside and eased the door closed behind him.

He heard a muffled laugh somewhere above, a sound deadened by a thin wall. The Masked Rider eased his booted foot ahead until his toes struck the first step. He hugged the wall as he went upward so that no sudden creaking would betray him. In a short time, he could see down the dark hall and the thin pencil of yellow light that escaped from under a door.

THE twin Colts slipped easily out of leather into his hands. Black coat and hat made him almost invisible as he moved along the hall. Through the thin panel, he could clearly hear every word said in the room beyond.

"—blasted him down, Bowen," a low voice was saying. "You had the men. As it is, you've exposed our hand. If they ever learn why they're raided it will be all up."

Bowen's angry voice cut in. "Blacky, yuh talk plumb loco. I never saw such fast, blazing shooting! He had some other hombre hid in the rocks with a rifle. I lost four men before I knew rightly what had happened."

"Rattled!" a heavy voice grunted.

"Rattled! Why, cuss yuh, Farger, I was no such thing!"

"Bowen, whatever happened, yuh lost yore head," Hard Pearson stated flatly. "There ain't no use any of us accusin' one another back and forth. We got to figger what to do and take steps to do it. Arguin' never got anybody anywhere."

"That's right," the smooth voice cut in. "The Masked Rider is somewhere around Cavallo. For some reason he's taken a hand in the game, and we can't afford to let him find out anything. There's just one answer."

"Kill him." The man in the dark hallway instantly recognized Chips Jason's low tense voice.

"That's right. Any ideas?"

"I'd say," Hard Pearson broke in, "that this Masked Rider hombre is probably in touch with the ranchers, say Dan Barth or old Hal Bledso. Trego, yuh're down that way. Hear anything?"

"Shore, I'm down there," a bitter, whining voice replied, "but I ain't got no neighbors. They treat me like I was a rattlesnake with his fangs out. I know them ranchers is havin' meetings. I know they're mighty riled that Frank Ewing was killed. But that's all. They don't tell me nothin'."

"Any new men wanderin' around the range?" the smooth voice asked.

"Blacky, I ain't seen any. My men ain't either."

"We talk in circles," Hard Pearson cut in. "This Masked Rider is a wanted outlaw. There's a bounty on his head. Arch Cole would be right pleased to collect it. For once in our lives, gents, we can salivate an hombre and get the thanks of the law for doin' it."

"Bowen," Blacky spoke up, "get some of those breed Apaches of yours and have them scour the badlands. I'll have Arch Cole deputize a few of our boys and he can do some hunting on his own. Seeing him out on the trail, may calm down them ranchers a little."

"A good plan," Farger assented. "It ain't long before our next job comes up and we don't want that Masked Rider jasper mixin' into things."

Bowen's heavy voice cut in, trembling with anger.

"I shore wish I had that Masked Rider in my gunsights! I'd turn over every rock in the Territory to salivate that gent."

The door swung open. The six men whirled around, hands slapping down to their holsters. They froze, eyes widened with stunned surprise. They stared down into the steady black bores of a pair of matched Colts.

The man framed in the door way seemed tall and grim, the black mask adding to the silent threat. Eyes blazed at them through the slits of the cloth. His deep voice filled the room.

"No need to search, Bowen. I'm right here at your service."

Bowen gulped, and then a slow angry red crept up from his neck and into his face. His mean eyes shot glances at his companions, but they remained frozen under the threat of the Colts. The Masked Rider's firm lips quirked slightly.

"Big talk I've been hearin'." He caught Blacky's slight movement as the man's right hand edged toward his coat lapel.

"I hope yuh try for the hideout gun," the Masked Rider said pleasantly. "There'll be one less sidewinder in Cavallo."

Kansas Blacky jerked, then froze, remaining silent. Again the masked man's eyes cut over the men, the famous Six Trails to Boot Hill held helpless under his guns. They were silent and tense, each man waiting for the split second chance to go for his gun.

"Bowen, shuck yore holsters, slow and easy," the Masked Rider ordered.

The big gunman slowly lowered his arms. The other five strained forward and the Masked Rider felt the tension rising in the room. Five men waited for his eyes to leave them for only an instant. Carefully, Bowen lifted his sixes with thumb and forefinger.

"Drop 'em," the Masked Rider ordered. "Now, Pearson, shuck yores."

IN A SHORT time the Six stood unarmed before him. The Masked Rider's contemptuous gaze flicked over them, resting on each face for a moment as though to memorize them.

Farger could easily have passed as Hard Pearson's twin brother. A shade more height and a small crescent-shaped scar on his left cheek seemed to be the only difference.

John Trego was short and fat, with a cherublike face and little red, pouty lips. His eyes revealed the sidewinder. Shallow, treacherous and shifty, their black depth glittered malevolently. Kansas Blacky was tall, broad-shouldered, with the lean suppleness of a mountain cat. He held his lower lip in strong white teeth and his black mustache quivered angrily.

"Yuh've planned to get rid of me," the Masked Rider said. "Mebbe yuh'll find that hard to do. I'm goin' to give you a warnin'. Get out of Cavallo and get out pronto."

"If we don't?" Kansas Blacky asked quietly.

The right Colt tilted up, blasted. A button jumped from Blacky's long coat. The other six-gun held the five men strained but rooted to their places.

"Decent men are tryin' to make a livin' out there on the range," the Masked Rider snapped. "For some reason yuh're tryin' to hamper 'em, using gun speed and fear to bend 'em to yore will. It can't be done."

Shouts sounded from the street below. The blast of the gun had been heard outside. The Masked Man's eyes cut around the room again.

"Six Trails to Boot Hill they call yuh. Six gunswift renegades who are too dangerous to face, too fast, too treacherous. Gents, I don't owe any money to the Cavallo bank. I don't need Farger to haul in supplies for me, nor Hard to sell me likker, or Trego beef. I'm not like the frazzled, worried gents yuh've faced before."

"Blacky!" a muffled shout sounded from below.

The lawyer jerked but the steady Colt held him in place.

"I'm tryin' yore gun speed, gents. I'll call on each of yuh for a sample at a time and place I choose. That stands as long as any one of yuh stay in Cavallo. Until then, adios, sidewinders."

His Colt blasted again and the lamp crashed into the darkness.

The Masked Rider wheeled and sped down the hall. He could hear the six men curse as they jumped for their fallen guns tangling up with one another.

Boots thundered on the steps leading up from the street.

The Masked Rider reached the back stairs, went down them with pantherlike speed. The noise and confusion still continued behind him as he pushed open the door and stepped out into the night. A low whistle brought Midnight instantly to his side. The Masked Rider sprang into saddle.

At that moment Arch Cole rounded the corner of the building.

"Hey!" he yelled.

The cloaked figure twisted around. Twin guns spat fire. The first slug sent the sheriff's hat flying and the second branded his ear lobe. Cole stumbled backward, fumbling for his six.

Midnight jumped away from the building and Cole had a glimpse of the rider. He saw the black coat and hat, caught a fleeting glimpse of the mask. Then a close-whining .45 slug sent him jumping for cover. He hugged the edge of the bank and sent futile shots pumping after the Robin Hood outlaw. All of Cavallo was very much alert and wide awake now.

Midnight could outrun any horse on the western ranges and the big stallion sped like an arrow away from the town. Blue Hawk materialized silently out of the shadows and sent his gray speeding along beside Midnight. The Masked Rider held Midnight to a slower pace, but still the ground rushed beneath them with dizzying speed.

At last the Masked Rider pulled up and looked back.

"I left a callin' card and a warnin', Blue Hawk," he said quietly. "Wander in to Cavallo. Be a breed Indian who likes red-eyes. Learn what yuh can."

"Yes, Senor," Blue Hawk answered calmly.

"Find out what holds the Six Trails together. There's some scheme that promises big money that keeps 'em from gunning one another down. I've seen that breed before, and they don't work in harness unless they have to."

"Rustling, maybe?" Blue Hawk suggested.

"No, there's not enough beef on these poor ranches around here. It has somethin' to do with these senseless raids on the spreads. See what yuh can find out."

"Yes, Senor. We meet at the hideout?"

"Right, Blue Hawk. Let's get there now. Wayne Morgan has to turn up at the Bar B in the mornin'."

CHAPTER V

Renegade Ranch

SAFE in the encircling canyon walls, the Masked Rider dropped his cloak and black hat. The mask was placed with them in the bed-roll and in a few moments, Wayne Morgan grinned across the small fire at Blue Hawk.

"We got things rollin' now," he drawled. "I reckon we can keep 'em that way."

Blue Hawk nodded and led Midnight and his gray to the small canyon pasture where the roan and the pinto grazed. He returned riding the pinto and leading the roan.

"I go to Cavallo and listen," he said gravely.

"Good. I'm goin' to get a look at Trego's Rafter T if I get a chance. It's close enough to the Border to be right handy for a bunch of sidewinders. Good luck, Blue Hawk."

The Indian nodded and kicked his heels in the pinto's side. He moved off into the night, already slouched in the saddle like a lazy breed Indian. Wayne Morgan chuckled and swung atop the roan.

He reached the Bar B just at dawn. Already the smoke from the cook shack spiraled high into the clear air and the hands in the bunkhouse were yawning and stretching as they came out the door. Morgan dismounted and unsaddled, turning the roan loose in the pole corral. Without a word to the hands, he turned to the ranchhouse.

Dan Barth met him at the door. His clear, eyes were sharp with unspoken questions.

"I'd shore like a cup of that Java," Morgan drawled. "I been spendin' a hard night in Cavallo."

The rancher instantly stepped back into the kitchen. He waited impatiently while Morgan took a long drag at his coffee cup, then sat it on the table.

"What did yuh learn?" Barth asked impatiently.

"Not too much," Morgan yawned. "The Masked Rider gent paid a visit to the Six Trails last night."

"What!"

Barth half rose from his chair. Morgan nodded, grinned.

"Yep. Walked right into the office of that lawyer gent, Kansas Blacky. All six of 'em was there."

Dan Barth stared disbelievingly at his gun hand.

"They didn't gun him down?" he exclaimed softly.

"Way I heard it, they didn't have a chance. He had 'em cold the moment he stepped in the door. Talk says he gave them hombres warnin' to leave Cavallo or keep their sixes oiled. Cole nearly caught him, but the sheriff wasn't fast enough. The masked feller got plumb away."

Barth suddenly threw back his head and laughed. It was a carefree, triumphant sound. He straightened and wiped his streaming eyes, still chuckling.

"I'd shore have liked to have been there." He sobered. "But the Masked Rider ain't safe in these parts now. The Six won't rest till they get him."

"Mebbe." Morgan shrugged. "I had a meetin' with the masked hombre. He had a word for you. Said the Six was goin' to sort of concentrate on him a while. He figgered I might look in on the Rafter T."

Dan Barth looked at Wayne Morgan.

"What did yuh learn in Cavallo?"

"Blamed little. I spent most of the time at the Bandido, hunting for jobs. Saw Pearson and Chips Jason, and Pearson mentioned the Rafter T. After that the Masked Rider so riled things up I figgered I'd better clear out. Them proddy gents might have accused me of bein' that outlaw."

"I'm glad they had their hands called," Barth said softly, "but I hope the Masked Rider saves Bowen for me. We got a personal debt."

"Shore," Morgan yawned. "Well, I'll be ridin' out to the Rafter T. If I don't show up for a few days or yuh see me ridin' with Trego's hands, don't get worried."

He finished his coffee and went to the cook shack. He ate a light meal and asked the cook to wake him up in a couple of hours, then piled in one of the bunks and went instantly to sleep.

It seemed no time at all before the cook was shaking his shoulder. Morgan saddled up again and rode out of the Bar B, heading south toward the Border. . . .

TREGO'S Rafter T was a sun-blasted collection of adobe huts around a creaking, rusty windmill. Morgan watched the place through sun-slitted eyes before he rode out of the canyon toward the spread. The hills

[Turn page]

sent a curving talon eastward here, cupping around the Rafter T. Just beyond the spur lay Mexico. Seeing the ranch, Morgan again had the thought it would make a nice renegade layout, handy to escape.

He wondered if he hadn't dismissed the cattle rustling too quickly. His face lifted and he squinted toward the hills. He saw the break of a canyon leading southward and it probably opened into Mexico. Stolen beefs could be whisked across the Border quickly from the Rafter T.

There were always roving bands south of the Border who would handle the cattle. Wanted men on both sides of the Border, those bandits were always in need of beef, guns, bullets, money. Morgan shrugged slightly and touched the roan's flanks. He rode out of the canyon and across the blazing hot plain to the Rafter T.

It was not until he had ridden into the yard that he saw the saddled horses. His eyes narrowed slightly but there was no change of expression on his face. He noted the corral, the adobe bunkhouse and cook shack. There was thick-walled building beyond the cook shack with wide, closed doors. The windmill creaked loudly.

Morgan dismounted and dropped the reins over the roan's head. He hitched at his gunbelts and turned toward the house. The door opened and John Trego stood framed. The cherubic face was blank and the pursed red lips carried a meaningless smile. The eyes were sharp and suspicious.

"Howdy," Morgan drawled. "I reckon yuh must be John Trego."

"I am," Trego's whining voice acknowledged.

Morgan saw the men come slowly out of the bunkhouse and lean idly near the door. He apparently paid them no attention. He cuffed back his hat.

"A big hombre at the Bandido in Cavallo said I might sign on out here," he said. "Fellow's handle was Pearson."

"Hard sent yuh?" Trego said in some surprise.

He stepped clear of the door. He wore a gunbelt, the holster tied low around his thick thigh. One dimpled hand never strayed far from the Colt.

Morgan's glance cut back to the door. Texas Bowen loafed into sight, evil face filled with suspicion.

"He said yuh might use gun hands," Morgan continued easily. "Didn't say what for, and I didn't ask. I ain't much interested."

Trego half turned, talking over his shoulder.

"Think we could use him, Tex?"

Bowen pushed his brawny shoulder away from the door frame. He shook his head, scowling hard at Morgan.

"I don't like strangers ridin' in."

"Pearson sent him," Trego whined. "Since we lost them—"

"Shut up, John!" Bowen snapped. "Yore lips flap too much." The big gunhawk turned his attention to Morgan. "Where yuh from?"

"Here and there," Morgan answered evasively. "Mostly north."

"Colorado, mebbe?"

"Mebbe"—Morgan grinned—"but I ain't sayin' too much. Yuh might send letters back there."

"Gun swift?" Bowen demanded.

"Some," Morgan affirmed. "Leastways the Pearson hombre figgered yuh might use me that way. Say, who owns this spread—you or Trego over there?"

"He does," Bowen growled, "but I ask the questions. We don't like footloose gents just wanderin' in. Was yuh in Cavallo last night?"

"Yeah," Morgan drawled. "There was a ruckus. Heard some talk about a Masked Rider."

Bowen's eyes narrowed. He flicked a glance at the bunkhouse, then back to Morgan. He licked his thick lips.

"He was there. Tried to shoot up the place. Disappeared mighty sudden like, too. Yuh wouldn't know about that?"

"Not a thing," Morgan denied.

"He was about yore build, pilgrim. Come to think of it, he had blue eyes, too. I saw 'em through the mask he wore."

Morgan shook his head. "Yuh read the wrong sign, mister. I ain't havin' no truck with the Masked Rider. He ain't my sort of gent."

A gun barrel jabbed into his back.

"Reach!" a deadly voice said.

"Nailed him!" Bowen shouted gleefully. "Blow out his backbone if he makes a move!"

WAYNE MORGAN slowly elevated his hands. His face had become taut and cold but the six-gun bored deep in his back. He stood without moving while Bowen swiftly emptied his holters and then stood back, a triumphant leer on his face.

"Pilgrim, I got a strong notion yuh're the Masked Rider. I aim to find out."

"Yuh made a mistake," Morgan said quietly.

"Mebbe," Bowen chuckled. He turned to Trego. "Put this jasper in the tool-house. Sonora can stand guard. I'm ridin' into Cavallo. I reckon the rest of the bunch will want to be here when we work the answers out of this buzzard."

Morgan turned on the order of the gunman behind him. He marched across the yard and around the bunkhouse. A thick-walled little hut with a dark, gaping door faced him. On snapped orders, he walked inside. The door slammed shut and he heard a padlock snapped in a heavy chain. Bowen's laugh sounded through the planking of the door.

Bowen, unwittingly, had come close to the truth. With Wayne Morgan prisoner or dead, the Masked Rider would no longer be a menace to the Six Trails to Boot Hill.

The inside of the little shack was dark and gloomy, the only light coming through two thin cracks in the thick door planking. Wayne Morgan cautiously felt around the walls, hoping that he might find something that he could use as a bludgeon. He quickly discovered that, though the place was called a tool-house, it was completely empty.

He completed the circuit of the walls and when he returned to the door he placed his ear against the planking and listened. For a time he heard nothing, then came the faint stirring of boots just outside. The guard was placed. Morgan straightened, sighed.

With a patience he had learned over the years, he hunkered down on the floor and leaned his back against the wall. There was no use trying to beat himself against the door and walls, hopelessly wasting his energy. Sooner or later someone had to come in, or he would be led outside. Given a split second chance, Wayne Morgan would take full advantage of it.

In about an hour he heard Bowen's heavy voice, muffled through the thicknesses of adobe. Morgan stood up, expecting the renegade to come in for him. Steps sounded outside and Morgan flattened himself against the wall beside the door.

"Any sound from the pilgrim?" Bowen asked.

"Not a thing, Boss," the guard replied.

"Probably figgerin' what he wants writ on his tombstone," Bowen laughed. "You keep watchin' that door, Sonora. Me'n the boys will be around some time tonight. I reckon yuh might see some fun."

"He ain't gettin' out of there, Boss," Sonora answered confidently.

Morgan heard Bowen walk off. He waited a while longer but there was no further sound and the cowboy sank back against the wall again. Texas Bowen was going to Cavallo. Sometime soon he would be back and then the Six Trails would start to work on their prisoner.

Time passed slowly. The thin lines of sunlight through the door cracks slowly slanted to the left, then gradually faded out. There was little change within the hut, but Morgan guessed that outside the desert twilight had come. He heard the cheerful clang of the cook's triangle and voices raised in joking as the Rafter T hands went to supper.

Sonora was relieved by another man who experimentally rattled the padlock and chain. Not long after, Sonora came back to take over his post again.

"No chow for the pilgrim?" the guard asked.

"Why?" Sonora demanded. "He ain't goin' to be hungry for long. Not after the big ones get through with him."

"Reckon not."

Silence again that seemed to drag out into an eternity. Morgan dozed lightly, but his eyes snapped open at each little sound. Suddenly he stiffened, ears straining into the darkness. He couldn't be sure, but he had caught the faint, far-off cry of the mountain lion. He arose and felt his way to the door, pressed his ear against the hard planking.

In a few moments the sound came again, much nearer. Wayne Morgan smiled in the darkness, and again settled himself to wait. Each moment seemed a week long, so slowly did they drag by. Outside, Senora stirred and yawned loudly. The guard walked up and down a few times, then settled himself. Morgan waited.

IN A SINGLE flowing motion he came to his feet when he heard the sound. There was a slight scuffle, a gurgling, whispering moan that was quickly cut off. Morgan stood at the door. There was complete silence for a short time.

Then the chain rattled slightly and the padlock made a soft, muffled click. Slowly and carefully someone pulled the chain clear and the door was pushed silently open. Blue Hawk's shadow was lined against the starlit night sky.

"Good work, Blue Hawk," Morgan breathed.

"You don't show up," Blue Hawk answered. "You say you be here and I know you have trouble. I come find out."

"The Six trails are goin' to pay me a visit," Morgan whispered. "Bowen has the idea I'm the Masked Rider and he figgered on torturin' it out of me."

"Use guard," Blue Hawk grunted. "He won't care."

Morgan slipped out the door. The guard's sprawled figure was a dark blob at the corner of the shack. Blue Hawk's sheath knife had worked silently and efficiently. Morgan bent over the man and his eyes lighted when he felt the crossed gun-belts. In another second Sonora's guns rested snugly in Wayne Morgan's holster.

CHAPTER VI

Gun Trap

QUIETLY, with Blue Hawk aiding, Morgan carried Sonora's body inside the shack. He carefully pulled the chain in place and snapped the padlock through the links, then tossed the key away in the darkness. Blue Hawk touched his arm.

"I took the roan from the corral, Senor. And Midnight is waiting just

beyond the ranch."

"Good," Morgan snapped. "The Masked Rider has a call to make here."

Two shadows cut across the Rafter T yard, making a wide circuit around the bunkhouse. They melted into the night beyond the corral. Blue Hawk led to where he had left the horses and Wayne Morgan went swiftly to work. In a short time, the Masked Rider went with swift, panther stride toward the ranchhouse.

He stopped just outside the door. The blazing eyes behind the slitted mask swept a swift glance around the yard. Someone laughed loudly in the bunkhouse, a horse in the corral stamped. Satisfied, the Masked Rider lifted the Colts in the holsters to make sure they were clear. He carefully pushed open the door and stepped inside.

He was in the kitchen. Lamplight streamed toward him down a long hall. Like a black ghost, the Masked Rider went silently down the hall to the wide front room, stopping just outside the open door.

John Trego sprawled in a chair, whisky bottle and glass beside him on a little table. The cherubic fat face glowered at the far wall. Trego downed the drink in the shot glass and arose. The lamplight glittered off the brass cartridges in his gun-belt.

With a single swift movement, the Masked Rider silently stepped inside the door. He waited, blue eyes blazing at the renegade rancher. Trego sensed someone in the room and wheeled to face the masked figure in the doorway.

His pursy mouth dropped open. Instinctively his right hand made a slight jerking motion that he instantly checked. The two men stood across the room from each other, their glances clashing and locking. Trego stood rooted, then almost imperceptibly he went into a crouch. The Masked Rider made no move. Trego's hand hovered over his Colt.

"Yuh're the first of the Six Trails I'm callin'!" The Masked Rider's voice filled the room. "John Trego, yuh're called to fill yore hand."

Trego made no move. His beady eyes locked on the black mask, his hand still quivered above his holster. He licked his lips.

"Where'd yuh come from?" he gritted.

The broad shoulders under the black coat shrugged slightly.

"Who cares? Yuh didn't leave Cavallo while you had the chance, Trego. Now yuh're called. I want to see yore gunplay."

Trego showed no fear, only a deep surprise. A tense, thundering silence held the room. The Masked Rider waited, tall and menacing.

With the suddenness and speed of a striking snake, Trego's hand splayed out and shot downward. The heavy Colt seemed to jump into his fat fingers and flash upward. The draw was swift and fast, deadly.

The Masked Rider's hand blurred down. His Colt swiveled up from the holster. It spat flame and smoke a split second before Trego's. The rancher's slug bit plaster from the wall beside the Masked Rider's head.

John Trego smashed back against the wall. He remained plastered there, eyes wide in horrified disbelief. A red stain touched his shirt front and started spreading. His pursy lips moved without sound for a second, then he caught his voice.

"Yuh—did it!" he exclaimed.

His cherubic face twisted in a spasm of pain and hate flamed in his eyes. He tried to raise his Colt, but the weapon was too heavy for him. It crashed loudly to the floor, dropping from his weakening fingers. His eyes filmed and his knees turned to rubber. He slid down the wall to the floor and his boot heels kicked jerkily.

The Masked Rider whirled, running down the hall. He reached the back door as the hands rushed in from the bunkhouse. Both guns were in his hands when he stepped out. The men pulled up short. The two leveled Colts were held steady.

"Shuck yore hardware," the Masked Rider ordered. "Throw the guns as far as yuh can."

SLOWLY the four men pulled their guns. They arced off into the night. The Masked Rider edged around them, Colts still holding steady.

"Yore boss is dead," he told them. "He matched sixes with me and lost. Tell that to the others. Tell 'em I have turned their prisoner loose. There's just Five Trails to Boot Hill now and there'll be less the next time I call a showdown. Stand hitched. Adios."

He whirled and started running toward the corral. He pulled up short when he heard the beat of horses' hoofs on the road. His eyes cut to the gate as five men rode in.

Twin Colts cut upward and belched flame and smoke. Two horses went down in the gate and the riders behind crashed into them. Dust rose in blinding clouds, and the Masked Rider heard Hard Pearson's strangled curses. The wide lips beneath the black mask broke into a grin. He sped around the corral, then cut away from the buildings.

Blue Hawk appeared and the Masked Rider vaulted to Midnight's back. The stallion whirled around and pounded away into the night. Back at the Rafter T, five jarred and shaken gunslicks untangled themselves from the fallen horses.

The Masked Rider and Blue Hawk sped swiftly away, toward their hideout in the malpais. Suddenly the Masked Rider pulled up and Blue Hawk instantly halted. Both

BLUE HAWK

men sat silent as though carved from stone.

"Riders, Senor," Blue Hawk stated quietly. "They come this way."

"To the little rise over there," the Masked Rider snapped, wheeling Midnight.

They raced for the hummock and sped around it, sliding their horses to a halt. Both men vaulted from saddle, Blue Hawk snatching the rifle from the scabbard. Without a word, they ran to the crest of the hummock and threw themselves flat. Two pair of keen eyes searched the night. Blue Hawk shoved the rifle out ahead of him.

The almost imperceptible sound the Masked rider had heard increased. Then out of the night riders materialized, at least a dozen of them. Blue Hawk gripped the rifle, watching. The Masked Rider made no move.

The riders swept past the hummock, speeding toward the Rafter T. The Masked Rider had a glimpse of a beefy figure leading the cavalcade. Hoofbeats drummed loudly and then receded as the men disappeared. The two hidden men waited for a while, then the Masked Rider came to his feet.

"Arch Cole, the Cavallo sheriff," he said, "and his gunhawk deputies. They must have heard the shootin' back there. Lucky we heard 'em comin'."

"They will search for us, Senor," the Yaqui said.

He slid down the hummock and replaced the rifle in the scabbard.

"Let them," the Masked Rider answered shortly. "They'll have a hard trail to untangle."

He snatched off his black hat and cloak, passed them to Blue Hawk. The mask followed. The bed-roll produced the gray Stetson and Wayne Morgan mounted the hammerhead roan.

"Meet me near the Bar B in the mornin', Blue Hawk. Things may pop now that Trego's dead. Mebbe the other five will get in a panic and show their hand."

"Yes, Senor. Nothing else for me?"

"Rest," Morgan answered kindly. "Yuh need it. I'll see yuh tomorrow."

He rode off into the night. Blue Hawk led Midnight and urged his gray in a fast trot toward the hideout. His impassive face showed no emotion, but his dark eyes glowed deeply for a second when he thought of John Trego. There was one less sidewinder in the world.

The next morning the men at the Bar B stared at the sleeping figure, puzzled. Wayne Morgan had slipped inside the bunkhouse, undressed and gone to sleep without their knowing it. Their movement and voices awakened him. He sat up and yawned. . .

"Yuh must have cat feet," a cowboy growled.

"The cook gave yuh sleeping pills," Morgan said, and grinned. "I never heard such snorin'. Durned near blew the door off the hinges."

He put his hat on his dark hair and

climbed into his trousers and boots. He strapped the gun-belt around his slender waist and followed the men to the cook shack. He had just finished breakfast when the sheriff and his posse rode in. Morgan leaned easily against the door of the shack and watched Dan Barth walk up to the lawman.

"What's wrong, Arch?" he asked.

THE fat man looked tired and proddy. He looked over the men, scowling, shifty blue eyes hard and suspicious. His glance cut down to Barth and he managed to salvage a ragged half-smile.

"Had some trouble, Dan," he rumbled. "Any of yuh seen the Masked Rider gent?"

"Masked Rider!" Barth exploded. He shook his head. "All my boys was inside last night, Arch. We heard nothin'."

"We trailed him from the Rafter T," Cole rumbled. "He changed hosses out on the range. Had a pardner, I reckon. Trail headed this way and then faded out about ten mile back."

Dan Barth shrugged.

"He wasn't around here. What did he do at the Rafter T?"

"Killed John Trego!" Cole blurted angrily. "Shot him down in cold blood in his own front room. He piled Hard Pearson and Kansas Blacky out of their saddles when they rode up, payin' a friendly call on John."

Barth's eyes widened and Arch Cole realized that in his anger he had said too much. His brows knotted in a wrathful scowl.

"I know yuh didn't like Trego, but murder was done. If yuh see the Masked Rider yuh got to tell me, Dan. I'm the law in these parts."

"Shore, Arch," Barth answered easily. "Can yuh light and eat?"

"Like to, but that trail was mighty hot when we lost it. That outlaw holds a heap of dinero on his hide and I'd like to collect. We'll mosey on, take a pasear in them badlands."

Cole touched his jaded nag with the spurs and the posse rode out of the yard. Dan Barth watched them. His men gathered in a loose circle around him. Finally Barth sighed.

"Trego dead! One of the Six wasn't fast enough. I hope that Masked Rider gent lives a long, long time. He may be an outlaw, but he's shore done all of us a big favor."

The group broke up. Wayne Morgan followed Dan Barth to the house. The young rancher was elated, excited by the news. Morgan let him ramble on a while, then broke in.

"Dan, when have these loco raids happened?"

Barth looked puzzled a moment. Then said:

"Why, most any time the sidewinders want to pull 'em, I reckon."

Morgan shook his head thoughtfully.

"There ain't been nothin' unusual happen around Cavallo just before or after the raids?"

"No," Barth replied slowly after thinking over the question. "Ain't been a thing wrong."

"What do the renegades do when they hit?" Morgan asked.

"Do!" Barth exploded. "They ride in fast and throw a ring of rifles around us before we know what's happened. They hole us up tight until just before dawn."

"Do they hit other spreads at the same time?"

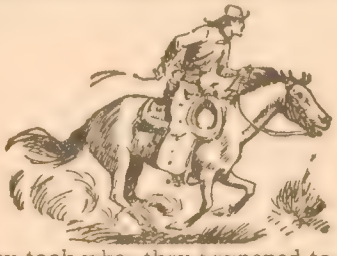
"They're hit," Barth agreed, "but not so heavy. Them sidewinders sort of take their spite out on one spread."

"Then the other ranches get just enough trouble to keep 'em tied down—is that it?" Morgan asked.

"I reckon that's it," Barth answered thoughtfully, "though I never thought of it that way. But why do they do it, Morgan? What's behind it all?"

"I don't know," the waddy replied and tugged at his ear lobe. "It was only in the last few raids yuh lost cows, I understand."

"That's right, and there wasn't enough rustled to make anybody any dinero. We figgered them bandits needed some beef bad,



so they took what they happened to run on."

Morgan arose and shifted his guns to a better position.

"Thanks, Dan, mebbe yuh've give me an idea. Now I'll give you one. With Trego dead, I doubt if yuh lose more beef, though that wasn't the reason for the raids. It was just a sort of idea that happened along."

"The Rafter T?" Barth asked, then shook his head. "Trego didn't need to rustle. He got enough dinero helping with the dirty work of the Six Trails."

"Mebbe. We'll see—the next raid that comes along. I got to ride now. See yuh around."

HE SAID no more but pushed out the door.

In a short while he saddled the roan and rode away from the spread. He kept a wary eye for Arch Cole and his posse. Once out of sight of the spread, he gave the call of a mountain lion and waited. Blue Hawk

appeared, riding the pinto. The Indian cast a quick glance around the horizon, then rose up.

"Sheriff ride by with many men," he said. "Comb badlands."

"Our hideout's safe?" Morgan asked quickly.

The Indian's lips curled briefly. "They're not good trackers. Border breeds with scales on their eyes. It's safe, Senor."

"Learn anything?" Morgan asked sharply.

"The five renegades very mad," Blue Hawk replied. "They worse when they find dead guard in shack. They ride back to Cavallo, except the man called Texas. He stay at the Rafter T."

Morgan settled in the saddle, frowning at the rim of the sun-blasted hills. Blue Hawk waited patiently, his dark eyes sweeping the horizon constantly. Finally the wandering cowboy leaned forward in the saddle and sighed.

"It begins to make a pattern, Blue Hawk, but there's a heap missin'. These ranches around here get raided. Nothin' much stole —just a heap of jaspers shootin' off rifles all night, then ridin' off just before dawn."

"Men killed," the Yaqui put in.

"Yeah, but that ain't the reason for the raids. Dan Barth tells me them renegades hit one spread hard and the others with just enough men to keep 'em sittin' tight and dodgin' bullets. Looks like they don't want the ranchers' helpin' one another on them nights."

"Good tactics," Blue Hawk said with faint approval.

"But why?" Morgan demanded. "We know the Six Trails are in this up to their scurvy necks. Them gents do nothin' unless there's dinero in it. Apparently these raids don't make them a cent, and that's all wrong."

"The Six interested in Rafter T," the Yaqui suggested. "They leave a man to take Trego's place."

MORGAN'S open palm slapped against the saddle horn.

"The answer must be on that spread. It's the only place. Cavallo is a small town, but if anything crooked was goin' on, there'd still be too many pryin' eyes. The Six would avoid that if they could."

"You ride to the Rafter T, Senor?" Blue Hawk asked quietly.

"It's the only answer," Morgan replied. "I'll hole up and keep an eye on the place. You get supplies at Cavallo and meet me out there. We may be watchin' for days, and I don't want a minute passin' but what the Rafter T has you or me lookin' at it."

"Good, Senor. I go to Cavallo. Check hideout and find where sheriff is. Then I join you at Rafter T."

"Fair enough, Blue Hawk. I'll be watching for yuh."

CHAPTER VII

Night Raiders

AS THE two men parted, Morgan headed southward and the Indian slouched along the trail to Cavallo. Morgan reached the Rafter T range in an hour and struck off in a wide circle to hit the spread itself from the south. He remembered the long arm of the hills that cut the Rafter T from Mexico.

Somewhere in the circle Morgan knew he crossed onto foreign soil. But the blazing sun, the desert and hills looked no different. Morgan rode with his hands close to his sixes, eyes constantly cutting ahead to the broken hills where ambush or surprise might lurk. It took him more than four hours to work around through the pass where he could look down on the adobe buildings of the Rafter T.

The ranch looked silent and deserted from where he paused, seeming to sleep in the hot sunlight. But as Morgan watched, a tiny figure left the bunkhouse and walked to the corral. In a few moments it returned to the bunkhouse and the yard was empty again. But Morgan had seen that the place was not deserted.

Morgan turned the roan and rode back into the pass. He had a feeling that this canyon might be well-traveled by renegades from south of the Border and didn't want to be trapped by gunmen behind him and the Rafter T in front to block his escape.

His blue eyes searched the canyon walls and at last he found what he wanted—a fault in the wall formed a steep but not impossible slope to the top of the hill. Instantly Morgan turned the roan. Horse and rider struggled up the slope, cutting loose a small avalanche of rock and dust.

Morgan rested the roan for a while after they had reached the rim. Then he mounted and rode cautiously northward. He finally dismounted and picketed the animal, then went ahead on foot.

He wanted no chance glimpse caught of himself against the skyline as he spied on the suspicious ranch.

He found a flat rock projecting out from the face of a broken cliff, threw himself down there and wriggled out to the edge of the rock. It was made to order. From this roost he could plainly see everything that moved in the Rafter T yard. All the buildings were in plain sight and he could watch the trail to the ranch for miles. He pulled his hat lower over his eyes and settled himself for a long vigil.

The hours passed. Down at the ranch nothing suspicious happened. A few hands moved around now and then, to the corral,

to the cook shack and the bunkhouse. Once Texas Bowen came out in the yard and the hands clustered around him for a short time. Morgan wished that he could have heard the conversation, but of course that was idle thought.

Bowen disappeared back in the house and for a long time nothing happened. The sun wheeled westward and finally dipped below the hills. Long shadows crept out across the Rafter T range. Morgan heard the brazen clang of the cook's triangle and saw the men troop in for their supper.

Just after that he heard the faint call of a mountain lion. Blue Hawk was searching for him. Morgan returned the signal and set himself to wait again. Half an hour later Morgan heard a slight sound behind him and whirled. Blue Hawk crawled toward him.

"I watch now," the Yaqui said quietly. "Food waits back by the roan."

Morgan was glad to get away from the rock and stretch cramped muscles. Blue Hawk had tied a pack of food to the roan's saddle and Morgan ate. He moved around flexing his muscles. The night set in and a thousand stars burst into light. Under the cover of darkness, Morgan walked boldly back to the rock and hunkered down beside his companion.

"Hank Farger very busy at his freight station," the Indian reported.

"Supplies come in, I reckon."

"Maybe," Blue Hawk answered, "but not for the stores. Farger drives wagon inside station and closes gates. See nothing."

Both men stiffened when they heard the faint beat of many hoofs in the canyon pass. They saw lights spring up in the Rafter T buildings. Blue Hawk stared into the darkness toward the pass.

"Riders, Senor, many of them. From below the Border."

Wayne Morgan kept his eyes on the Rafter T. He saw the black bob of the riders stream into the yard. Rafter T men met them. Bowen's big bulk was lined against lamplight as he stepped in the doorway. He admitted two men.

AFTER a while, they came out again There was more activity in the yard and then the men rode out again. Morgan's keen eyes watched them fan out, the greater bulk riding toward the Hat. Smaller bands fanned out toward the other ranches.

"The raids start at the Rafter T," Morgan breathed. "Bandits from below the Border get their orders here."

"We ride to help?" Blue Hawk asked.

"No. The ranchers took care of themselves before and I reckon Dan Barth can still put up a good scrap. We stay right here."

They settled down once more to wait. In about an hour, there was more activity at the Rafter T. Big freight wagons came rolling in from Cavallo and wheeled into the yard. Men scurried around as the wagons drew up before the big barnlike adobe. Lamplight fanned out and Wayne Morgan saw the men unload the wagons. They carried the cargo inside, working swiftly.

The doors closed. The wagons wheeled away and started back to Cavallo. The Rafter T became dark and quiet. Wayne Morgan stirred restlessly.

"Now what do yuh reckon they brought?" he asked thoughtfully.

"I could not tell, Senor."

Morgan came to his feet. "I'm finding out, Blue Hawk. Meet me on the other side of the ranch. I think we got the answer right down there."

He hurried to the roan and mounted. Working down the steep narrow crevice in the dark was ticklish business, but at last Morgan reached the canyon floor and headed toward the Rafter T. He rode clear of the canyon and cautiously approached the distant ranch.

He left the roan and went forward afoot, pausing at the edge of the ranch yard and listened, checking every shadow for the presence of a probable guard. None had been posted.

Morgan edged carefully around the bunkhouse, cutting swiftly across the yard to the big adobe. He reached the wide locked doors. They were double padlocked with heavy chains. Wayne Morgan stepped back, baffled, eyes cutting along the front of the building. There was no apparent way he could enter except through the doors.

Suddenly he stiffened, listening. Hoof beats sounded in increasing tempo, headed directly for the ranch. Morgan turned back the way he had come. He slid to a halt, half hidden by shadows when lights sprang up in the bunkhouse. The door opened and a man stood framed in the light.

"They're comin' back," the man called over his shoulder.

Morgan's hands pulled the twin Colts from their holsters. Behind him, he could hear the horsemen sweep in toward the ranch. There was no hiding place for him, and already men pushed through the door of the bunkhouse. He was trapped!

Wayne Morgan edged toward the ranchhouse, hoping against hope that the darkness would cover him. More men came from the bunkhouse. Someone lighted a lamp in the ranchhouse kitchen and Morgan was framed against the window.

"Hey!" a hoarse voice yelled. "Who are you?"

Morgan jumped to the protection of the shadows. The men had stopped, turning his way, already beginning to fan out to encircle him. Morgan gripped the guns more

tightly and his mouth set in a grim fighting line.

"Get him!" the hoarse voice commanded. "He ain't one of our boys."

The gunhawks pushed forward eagerly. Morgan's Colts spat flame. A man dropped and another cursed. Thundering battle broke loose in the yard. Guns bucked and thundered, the lead searching the shadows for the intruder.

Morgan had jumped to one side when he fired, getting closer to the corner of the house. He heard lead strike the adobe where he had stood. He fired with deadly precision, breaking up the first rush of the gunmen, downing two more. In the confusion, he managed to reach the corner and duck around it. He streaked at a crouching run toward the front, then cut away toward the edge of the yard.

He knew he had a bare minute before the approaching horsemen would sweep down and spread out to find him. He was only a flitting shadow at the far edge of the yard when the first of the hands rounded the corner. The man saw him, fired hastily. The fellow howled with agony when Morgan's return shot spun him half around and smashed him backward.

MORGAN was clear now, running toward the roan, hoping that he would not be cut off from his horse. He came to a plunging halt when hoof beats sounded loud. His Colts lined up.

"Hurry, Senor!" Blue Hawk shouted.

The Yaqui came out of the night, riding fast, leading the roan. Morgan sheathed his sixes and jumped for the saddle. He landed in leather and the two men wheeled their horses away from the Rafter T. Guns snarled after them, but the shots were high and wild.

Morgan did not worry about them. It was the unknown band of mounted men who were the real danger. He twisted around and threw a quick glance backward. He could dimly see the milling shapes in the ranch yard as the first horsemen rode in. Quick, shouted orders and the blood-cry of the renegade pack swept upward.

"It's a race for it!" Morgan shouted to the Yaqui. "Head for the canyon."

They bent over their horses and the animals ate up the ground. There were a few wild shots as the bandits came thundering on in pursuit, but Morgan didn't bother to return them. It would be nip and tuck all the way to the canyon.

The ground blurred by in the night. Behind them the rolling beat of pursuing horses sounded loud and thundering. Blue Hawk and Morgan had a fair lead and their powerful horses were a match for the bandits. The canyon mouth was an eternity away.

There were a few more shots that buzzed high over their heads. The dark bulk of the hills loomed closer and finally they could see the black maw of the canyon. Morgan shot a quick glance over his shoulder. He could clearly hear the bandits but the night made things uncertain, indistinct. He based his hope of escape on that.

At last they plunged into the canyon. Morgan was slightly in the lead. He urged the roan to greater speed, then abruptly pulled up. A twitch of the reins and the roan headed for the narrow crevice, plunged into it. Blue Hawk followed. Instantly the two men pulled up their horses and vaulted from saddle, the Yaqui snatching the rifle clear of the scabbard.

They waited, eyes hard and glittering. The rock walls abruptly echoed and thundered as the bandits swept down the canyon. Morgan's Colts tipped up, ready to line down. Blue Hawk held the rifle half-way to his shoulder.

Like flitting shadows of evil, the bandit horsemen swept by the crevice and on down the canyon. Dust clouds rose like a billowing fog, obscuring everything. The renegades and breeds streamed by, paying no attention to the dark, narrow crevice where the two men did. The last hoof beat faded swiftly away and Morgan straightened.

"It worked," he announced. "But not for long. Hit leather, Blue Hawk."

They bulged into the main trail and streaked back the way they had come. The bandits would soon discover that they chased only shadows and would be coming back to pick up the trail again. But Wayne Morgan's quick thinking had lessened the odds against himself and Blue Hawk.

They came out of the pass and Morgan instantly headed east to cut around the Rafter T in a wide circle. Lights gleamed at the ranch but the two riders gave it a wide berth. Soon they were north of the spread and lined out toward Cavallo. Only then did Wayne Morgan relax.

They rode at a slower pace until they reached the edge of the badlands. Morgan drew up and Black Hawk impassively waited for instructions. Morgan's eyes cut back toward the Rafter T and his forehead knotted in a puzzled frown.

"Now what yuh reckon them wagons brought in? What's their next move?"

"I'll watch the ranch," Blue Hawk said quietly.

"Not this time, Blue Hawk. We stirred up that band of rattlesnakes and they're goin' to be mighty shore nobody's spyin' on 'em. Get back to the hideout and rest. Meet me in Cavallo tomorrow night. I got a mighty powerful desire to take a look at Farger's freight station."

"What you do?" Blue Hawk asked.

"I'm ridin' to the Bar B. Them hombres that was chasin' us hit the ranches again,

shore as shootin'. See yuh tomorrow, Blue Hawk."

THE two men separated, the cowboy riding at a fast pace toward the distant Bar B. Dawn had broken by the time he reached the spread. A single glance and he knew he had guessed right.

Dan Barth and his waddies stood out in the yard, checking the damage. Broken windows looked blank and hollow in the early morning light. A dead horse lay close to the corral. New bullet marks pocked the adobe walls.

Wayne Morgan rode in. Dan Barth looked up, red-eyed and tired.

"Where yuh been?" he asked harshly. "For a gun fighter yuh shore miss all the fun."

"Saddle up," Morgan snapped. "Let's see what happened to the Hat."

Barth swore and jerked from the group, running toward the corral. In a short time he came riding back and Morgan turned to ride with him toward the distant Hat. For a time, they rode without speaking, the strain showing deeply etched lines in Dan Barth's young face.

"How many hit the Bar B?" Morgan asked.

Barth shrugged. "Not many, I reckon, but enough to keep us holed up. They hit us around midnight."

Wayne Morgan recalled the big band of horsemen at the Rafter T who had broken up into smaller units, scattering out toward the ranches. But a more grim memory was that of the big band that had headed directly toward the Hat.

Now Morgan began to have some idea about the purpose of the raids. They kept the ranchers holed up on their own spreads, nailed down tight defending their homes and property while some sort of secret shipments arrived at the Rafter T.

CHAPTER VIII

Murder Charge

JUST as soon as Morgan and Barth saw the Hat spread, they knew something was surely wrong. Men milled around the yard near the ranchhouse and a rider went whipping away toward Cavallo. Dan Barth swore grimly and set the spurs. Morgan's roan, already tired by the escape from the bandits, was hard pressed to keep up with the young rancher.

They swept into the yard. The ranchhouse door opened and Helen Bledso appeared. She came running into Barth's arms when he dismounted and started toward the house.

"Dan! Dan! They raided us again last night! Father's bad hit."

"Old Hal!" Dan Barth exclaimed. His face grew dark with anger. "The sneakin' sidewinders!"

He swung Helen around and, with a hand at her elbow, hurried her into the house. Wayne Morgan followed close behind.

The room showed signs of the seige. The window glass was gone. Plastering from the bullet-pitted walls made a fine powder along the floor. A what-not that had been loaded with little ornaments was a mass of shattered china and splintered wood. Window sills and frames were bullet-chewed.

Helen led the way to a bedroom and the Hat foreman moved silently to one side as they stepped up to the bed. Old Hal Bledso lay stretched out, pitifully small and weak. His chest was a mass of crude bandages. His frail lids fluttered open and he smiled slowly when he saw Dan Barth.

"They—done a heap—of shootin', son," he murmured.

Barth leaned down, firm hand on the man's arm.

"I know, but don't yuh worry none. Yuh'll be all right."

"Of course I will," Bledso's feeble voice replied irritably. "It takes—more'n a couple of—outlaw bullets to put me in—Boot Hill. I aim to give these slugs back—when I'm up again."

Barth grinned and jerked his head to the door. The three of them slipped out and the foreman closed the door behind them.

"I've sent to Cavallo for the doctor," Helen whispered. "I hope he gets here in time."

"Don't worry," Barth told her confidently. "That old rawhider will come right out of it."

"He shore will, ma'am," Morgan put in. He looked around at the wreckage. "Must have been considerable gunslingers struck yuh last night."

"Twenty or thirty," Helen replied wearily. She sank into a chair that had a ragged bullet-hole in the high back. "They left just before dawn."

"Anyone else hurt?" Morgan asked.

"One of the boys got a burn on his arm," the girl replied. "Another has a broken collar bone. That's all."

"Do yuh need somebody to look after the ranch, Helen?" Barth asked her. "Old Hal ain't goin' to feel so chipper for a while."

The girl's chin set at a determined, fighting angle. She shook her head and then her eyes softened as she looked at Dan Barth.

"No," she said. "I'm taking over, and our foreman is all right. It's my problem and I can do it. But you're sweet to offer help, Dan."

The young rancher sighed and arose. He stared out a broken window toward the

bunkhouse. His strong fingers beat an impatient tattoo on the sill. Morgan watched him, the lazy blue eyes reading the turbulent thoughts that were reflected in Dan Barth's scowl. Barth whirled around.

"Arch Cole said he'd stop these raids. Now they've come again. Helen, you took the heavy attack, and I was holed up over at my place. I reckon the Circle Seven, the Flyin' W and the rest got their share."

Helen nodded. "When will it ever end, Dan?"

"Right now!" Barth said savagely. "I'm gettin' the ranchers together and we're ridin' into Cavallo. We're callin' them Six Trails and we're goin' to pitch Arch Cole right out of office. Ain't no use stringin' along and gettin' shot up and bein' satisfied with excuses."

"Dan," Morgan put in quietly, "Yuh're goin' to the Bar B and yuh're stayin' there, leastways for a few more days."

Barth swung toward Morgan. "Yuh're loco! I'm gettin' action."

"Yuh'll get yore head shot off, and a heap of good men will be killed uselessly. Suppose I tell yuh I know now why these raids keep happenin'."

BARTH'S mouth dropped open. Helen made a little exclamation and jerked erect in her chair. Morgan met their stunned stares and they read the truth in his eyes. Barth came back to the center of the room.

"Why, Morgan?"

Morgan shook his head and sighed.

"Yuh'll have to take my word for a heap of things right now, Dan. You, too, Miss Helen. I've got a part answer, that's all. I've heard tell a little savvy can be mighty dangerous, So I'm askin' yuh to stand hitched till I learn some more."

Dan Barth made an impatient sound, but Helen's swift gesture checked him.

"How long will it take to find out everything, Morgan?" Barth asked.

"Who knows?" Morgan shrugged. "With luck, in a day or two. If them sidewinders are smart mebbe a week or more. But they're rattled now. Trego's killed, this Masked Rider hombre is loose in the neighborhood. I figger they'll rush things, and mebbe get careless. That's all we need, and that's what I'm hopin' for."

"Yuh speak in riddles," Barth said impatiently.

"It's the only way I can talk, Dan. I wouldn't be sayin' this much except yuh want to jump into things yuh don't know nothin' about. Miss Helen, if them renegades get careless, they show their hand. I reckon between us and the Masked Rider we'll have aces to top it when the show-down's called."

"What do you want to do?" she asked.

"Ride to Cavallo and take a look-see. Give me time for that and to report back. I'm shore of what I'll find, and then we'll be ready to move."

Helen looked around and up at Dan Barth. He tugged at his lower lip, frowning, plainly undecided whether to side with Wayne Morgan or not.

"Dan," the girl said softly, "the Hat spread is backing Morgan. We're doing nothing until we hear from him."

"It's a heap of trust to put in a gunslinger's hunch," Barth said slowly.

She smiled. "I trust the gunslinger and I trust his hunch. I think he knows what he's doing."

"Thanks, ma'am," Morgan replied gravely. He shoved his hat on his head. "I'll be ridin' now. Dan, I'll be at the Bar B as soon as I'm through at Cavallo. Adios."

He left the house, mounted the roan, and rode slowly toward Cavallo. There was no hurry to reach the town and he wanted to rest his mount as much as possible.

It was late in the afternoon when he entered the Main Street, slouching easily as though he didn't have a care in the world. Instantly he noted that the wide, strong gates to the freight station were tightly closed. A gun-belted loafer leaned in the sun against the wall, lazily smoking a cigarette. It looked innocent enough, but Morgan didn't miss the quick hawk glance the man gave him as the waddy rode by.

Cavallo seemed as dead as ever. Morgan's firm lips twisted in a light grin as he headed the roan for the Bandido hitch-rack. After his capture and release at the Rafter T, the Six Trails—now Five—would not expect him to walk boldly into one of their lairs. Sheer nerve might set them off balance.

He pushed through the swing doors and shot a glance toward the tables. Chips Jason was not around. The bartender, Shear, looked up without recognition. Wayne Morgan jingled his spurs to the bar and ordered.

"Pearson around?" he inquired lazily.

"He ain't. Went up the street. He'll be back most any time."

"Thanks," the waddy replied.

He toyed with the whisky glass, half turned so that he faced the swing doors. Time passed slowly and at last Morgan decided that Pearson was indefinitely delayed. He thought of the room above the bank and the long hall leading to the back stairs. His lazy eyes lighted.

Straightening, he placed the glass on the counter. He hitched up his gun-belt and spun a coin to the bartender. At that moment the doors flapped and Hard Pearson came in. His cold eyes took in Morgan without surprise.

"Yuh play yore luck when it's frazzled, cowboy," he commented. "Yuh shouldn't have come here."

Morgan frowned. "I don't savvy that Rafter T place yuh sent me. Folks got a heap of wrong ideas. I got guns stuck in my ribs and shoved into a shack like a yearlin' to the brandin' pen."

Hard Pearson grunted. "And the Masked Rider let yuh out. He must be a good friend of yores."

"That's somethin' else I don't savvy. He let me out all right, but I never saw that masked gent before in—"

THE GUNS bored deep in either side Wayne Morgan stiffened, and held himself absolutely still. A cautious hand shucked his guns from their holsters. Arch Cole stepped around in front of him, Colt leveled. Kansas Blacky moved carefully beside Hard Pearson. Morgan stared at them blankly.

"I don't savvy this, gents. I'm a peaceful cowboy."

"You're a murderer," Kansas Blacky rapped. "You shot down John Trego in cold blood. I'll see that Judge Zimmer hangs you. He's your meat, Arch. Put him in your cooler."

Arch Cole didn't mind how roughly he handled his prisoner. There was no danger in it so far as he could see since he was backed by Pearson, Blacky and Chips Jason, three of the fastest gunmen in Cavallo. Morgan's back ached from the bore of the Colt barrel by the time he was shoved in a cell and the door locked.

"See if yore friend, the Masked Rider, can get yuh out of here," Pearson growled, then grinned as he snapped a black cigar between his strong teeth.

"You can think about a hang-noose," Blacky added.

They turned away and walked into the sheriff's office. Morgan heard them talking in low tones, then the outer door was opened and closed. Morgan looked around the small cell, then went to the barred window.

He nearly laughed aloud. Farger's freight station could be clearly seen from here across an open expanse of sand and rusting tin cans. There would be no need to hide and watch. Morgan settled himself at the window.

He could not see the main gates but the big wall extended back some distance into his line of vision. It was joined to a couple of small buildings and Morgan watched the little windows for signs of life.

In about an hour, Sheriff Cole returned and Morgan sat down on his bunk. The lawman's heavy tread sounded in the corridor, then he stopped in front of the cell. His beady blue eyes rested on Morgan's lithe, relaxed figure. The thick lips chewed reflectively on a matchstick but Cole could not keep the gleam of triumph out of his eyes. Wayne Morgan noticed that one ear lobe was gone, the wound not entirely healed.

"Yuh sort of walked right into things," Cole chuckled.

"I still don't savvy why I'm here," said Morgan. "I didn't kill Trego."

"Mebbe not," Cole admitted contemptuously, "but yuh was out there. Kansas figgers you and this Masked Rider is mighty good friends. If he can't reach that outlaw gent for a while, he's got you anyhow."

"I ain't a friend to the Masked Rider," Morgan insisted. "Yuh're wastin' time."

Cole tipped back on his heels, then forward on his toes.

"Kansas says there's one shore way yuh could get out of here, amigo. Him and his friends would mighty like to know where they can reach the Masked Rider. Yuh tell them, yuh go free."

"If I don't?"

"Yuh might stand trial for murder. Mebbe yuh might get salivated tryin' to break out of the cell. Who'd care what happened to a wanderin' ranny nobody knows?"

"That way," Morgan grunted. "I'll think it over."

"Yuh'd better. Kansas will be at the Hat tomorrer and he'll come back to Cavallo late tomorrer night, the next mornin'. Yuh got till then to make up yore mind."

"The Hat?" Morgan asked, puzzled. "Ain't that one of them spreads beyond the hills?"

"That's right. Big one, too. The boss got salivated and a fool girl's runnin' it. Old Bledso owed the bank money and the note was due today. Kansas is Hard Pearson's lawyer and he's goin' out there to collect."

Morgan kept the excitement from showing in his face.

"He won't get the dinero," he said. "That spread looked poor to me."

"He'll get the ranch," the sheriff boasted. "The gal won't have the money so Kansas will come back here and get old Judge Zimmer to send me out with an eviction notice."

Morgan leaned back against the wall. He looked as if he were bored with Arch Cole's aimless chatter. The sheriff shifted his weight a couple of times, then walked off. Just before he closed and locked the door between the office and the cell block he called a last warning.

"Don't forget yuh ain't got much time. Yuh trade a hang-noose for some words, that's all."

The door banged shut and the lock clicked loudly. Wayne Morgan remained on the bunk for a while, staring hard at the far wall. The renegades were going to make quick work of the Hat. If they could foreclose, they would have forced out a strong enemy. Their control of the area would be even greater than before.

MORGAN stood up and went to the window again. He looked out through the bars at the freight station, but hardly

saw it. His main job now was to stop the move against the Hat. But he was in jail.

He glanced at the sun, saw that there was nearly an hour before darkness. He calmly threw himself full length on the bunk and went to sleep. . . .

Cole awakened him when the lawman brought him a tray of food. Morgan was made to back against the far wall and Cole shoved the tray along the floor after opening the door, his other hand keeping his six lined on Morgan. The fat sheriff seemed to breathe easier after he had barred the door again.

The meal was not bad. Morgan ate with satisfaction while the cell slowly darkened as the sun dipped further behind the western hills. Gradually even the walls faded into an indistinct gray. Morgan could hear the sounds of life on the street. Lamplight glimmered briefly from one of the windows of the stage station, then was snuffed out again. An hour passed.

Cole had again closed and locked the corridor door so that the few cells were pitch-dark. Wayne Morgan remained by the window, waiting. He was not surprised when he heard the slight scratching sound and dark shape loomed close to the bars.

"Senor?" Blue Hawk's whisper reached Morgan's ears.

"Here, Blue Hawk. Where's the sheriff?"

"He eats. Down the street. No one in office."

"Got Midnight?" Morgan asked.

"Yes, Senor. He waits beyond the town with the gray for you. Sheriff take the roan to the freight station."

"Know where the gent, Kansas Blacky, lives?"

"Yes, Senor."

"Good. I reckon I'd better get out of here."

Black Hawk silently vanished. He was gone but a few minutes, and when he returned he shoved twin sixes through the bars. Morgan's eager hands grabbed them.

"I take from desk drawer in office, Senor. Sheriff is very careless."

"Bueno. Now for the bars."

Again Blue Hawk vanished. Morgan shoved the Colts in his holsters and waited. The Yaqui appeared and pushed the end of a lariat through the bars. Quickly Morgan looped the rope around a couple of the bars and fashioned a tight knot.

"That should do it, Blue Hawk."

"Stand clear, Senor," the Yaqui warned and faded back toward the shadowy bulk of his horse.

He mounted, took a dally of the lariat around the saddle-horn. He spoke softly to the horse. It moved slowly forward until the rope slack had been taken up. Then it settled to a steady, hard pull.

Morgan, back in the cell, heard the rope hum as the hemp tightened. Little trickles of adobe sifted over the window ledge. There was a breathless moment when it seemed as if the rope might break. With startling suddenness, the adobe crumbled completely. The bars flew out the window, clanging together.

Instantly Morgan exploded to action. He sprang to the window and scrambled through. Dropping to the ground, crouching, his keen eyes swept the street. No one had taken alarm.

He ran toward Blue Hawk, who had untied the bars and coiled the rope. The Yaqui led up the gray, then vaulted into the saddle of his pinto. Morgan swung into leather and the two men faded swiftly into the night.

CHAPTER IX

Then There Were Four

NOT FAR out of Cavallo, Blue Hawk said a swift word, swerved a little. Wayne Morgan whistled and Midnight whinnied close by, came trotting up. Morgan vaulted from the gray's back and his eager fingers sought the lashing of the bed-roll behind the cantle on Midnight. In a short while it was the Masked Rider who vaulted into saddle, gave a quiet direction to Blue Hawk, then melted into the night.

He circled wide, expecting an alarm to be raised almost any moment. Once Arch Cole looked into the cell, Cavallo would explode with excitement.

Following Blue Hawk's directions, the Masked Rider came up behind a low, rambling building at the edge of town. No lights showed from the rear. The Masked Rider dismounted, loosened his Colts, and stepped warily around the house. His tread was soundless.

Around the corner, he saw mellow lamp-glow from a window. He eased forward and looked in. For a moment the black Stetson and masked face were framed in the light. Kansas Blacky sat at a table pouring over some legal forms.

The face at the window vanished and a dark figure skirted the wall to the low porch. It eased to the door, slowly turned the knob. The door was locked. The Masked Rider stepped back. His knuckles rapped sharply on the panels.

Hurried steps sounded inside. The door was flung open and Kansas Blacky stood framed, dark face scowling at the interruption. He recoiled when a colt was jammed into his midriff. The Masked Rider forced him backward, a gloved hand closing the door behind him.

Kansas Blacky's dark eyes showed no fear,

only surprise. He quickly recovered his wits and his thin lips broke in a smile.

"This is a surprise! You've come to rescue your friend, Morgan, I'd say."

"He's already a free man," the Masked Rider answered. "Back into that room. I'd like to see those papers that interested yuh."

"Legal forms only, hombre. You wouldn't be held by anything legal from what I hear."

Kansas Blacky turned on his heel, arms still held high. He marched back into the room, the Masked Rider close behind him. On orders, Kansas Blacky pulled down the blind and stepped to the far wall away from the table. The Masked Rider glanced down at the forms.

"Dispossess plea to the good Judge Zimmer," he said slowly. "The Hat Ranch looks good to the renegades of Cavallo."

Kansas Blacky said nothing. His eyes narrowed as he watched the black-cloaked figure. The Masked Rider's cold blue eyes blazed at him through the slits of the mask.

"Shuck yore gun, Blacky."

Carefully the lawyer reached down to the holster under his coat. He lifted the six-gun and dropped it to the floor. The firm lips under the black mask smiled and the Masked Rider holstered his six. His hands crumpled up the legal forms and ripped them into shreds. Blacky's face turned pale with anger but he remained silent.

"Yuh won't need these, Blacky, where yuh're goin'," the Masked Ranger said grimly. "They don't have ranches down there. Yore sidewinder friends won't need 'em, either."

The shredded paper dropped to the floor. A muffled shout sounded far down the street and the Masked Rider turned his head, listening.

"Arch Cole has found his prisoner gone," he commented. "Too bad. Arch was so shore Morgan would hang or tell what he knew about me. You was too, Blacky. Yuh trumped up a murder charge against Morgan. He would have hung for Trego's death."

Still Blacky didn't answer. The Masked Rider listened to the sounds of growing excitement down the street. He leveled his six and his voice became cold and deadly.

"Pick up yore Colt, Blacky, and put it in yore holster. Pronto!"

The lawyer picked up the weapon and shoved it into leather.

"I'm callin' yore gun speed, Blacky. Trego wasn't murdered. He killed hisself. His draw was slow. Yuh can slap leather when yuh're ready."

THE Masked Rider shoved his Colt in the holster and dropped his arms. He stepped clear of the table, waiting. Blacky made no move, listened to the growing sounds outside.

"I don't have to match sixes, outlaw," he chuckled. "My friends will be here soon and they'll take care of you."

"That way?" the Masked Rider said. He sighed. "Of course, if yuh won't fight, there's nothin' I can do. I'll meet yuh again, Blacky."

He turned toward the door. Instantly Kansas Blacky's hand slapped down and the heavy six blurred up. The Masked Rider whirled, sinking into a crouch. His Colt jumped from leather, lined in a split second, and blasted back against the heel of his hand. Blacky's shot was wild.

A round blue hole appeared above Blacky's right eye. The man's head snapped back and he fell as though a giant hand had knocked him down. The Masked Rider looked at the sprawled figure, slowly holstered his Colt.

Pounding steps sounded outside. With a sweep of his arm the Masked Rider knocked over the lamp, plunging the room into darkness. He jumped to the window, slammed it up as the front door was banged open.

His dark figure slipped out the window and dropped to the ground. He crouched there, hearing loud voices at the front of the house. A match flared in the room behind him. Cole's voice cursed loudly.

The Masked Rider ran to the back of the house, whistled softly, and Midnight came up. As he vaulted into saddle a shot blasted from the house, the bullet whining high over his head. The Masked Rider wheeled Midnight and a pressure of his knees sent the mighty stalion leaping into the night. Colts thundered a useless volley after his dark figure. He was gone. . . .

It was not much more than an hour later when Dan Barth, out at the Bar B Ranch, heard the rapid stroke of hoofbeats in the night. He jumped from bed, grabbing his gun. He peered out the window toward Cavallo, expecting to see the shadows of the bandits again returned to raid the Bar B.

He heard a shout from the bunkhouse. A single raider came pounding into the yard, to pull his horse to a sliding halt. Wayne Morgan.

Barth turned swiftly from the window and started piling into his clothing. He had not finished when Morgan came in. The cowboy breathed heavily and Barth started to light the lamp. Morgan stopped him.

"I ain't stayin' long, Dan, and I don't want no light. Arch Cole ain't far behind me. I want to get grub and tell yuh what's happened in Cavallo."

"It must be plenty," Barth snapped, "when the law is on yore trail."

"I'm shore a fugitive this time," Morgan chuckled. His voice instantly sobered. "Kansas Blacky had me arrested for the murder of John Trego. He had his bought judge fixed to hang me if the case had come to trial. The Masked Rider gent let me out."

"That so-called outlaw shore rides in when the goin's tough," Dan Barth said. "He can have the run of the Bar B any time."

"Shore," Morgan went on hastily. "Seems he faced Kansas Blacky and beat him to the draw. The Six Trails is now Four. Blacky was fixin' to foreclose on the Hat."

Barth whistled. He went to the dark window, peered out.

"What yuh plan to do?"

"Hide out till Cole's posse is wore to a frazzle huntin' me. I'll keep in touch with you or with Miss Helen at the Hat. But yuh still have to set tight till I give yuh the signal."

"All right," Barth said impatiently. "Get out to the cook shack and load yore supplies. I'll try to hold Arch Cole up for a while."

Morgan left the house, with Barth close behind him. The cowboy filled a sack with canned goods and tied it to the gray's saddle. He mounted, warned Barth to keep his temper and do nothing rash for a while yet. Suddenly he straightened, listening.

"Here comes the law, Dan. I'm ridin'. I'll see yuh."

He neck-reined the horse and streaked out of the yard, heading for the badlands. He was no more than out of sight when the Cavallo sheriff swept down on the ranch with a dozen deputies. Barth went to meet him.

NOT far out Wayne Morgan gave the call of the mountain lion. A faint answer came down the wind and Morgan headed toward the sound. Soon Blue Hawk appeared and Morgan drew up. He listened, twisting around to face the back trail. Satisfied, he straightened in the saddle and gently touched the gray's reins.

"Dan held Cole up," he told the Yaqui. "We're layin' low for a day, Blue Hawk, and I reckon both of us can shore stand the rest. This Cavallo ruckus is goin' to blow wide open in a mighty short time."

"That is good, Senor. But maybe I should watch while you rest?"

Wayne Morgan pulled at his ear lobe, staring thoughtfully ahead.

"Mebbe yuh should at that, Blue Hawk. Keep an eye on Hank Farger's freight station. If anything starts movin' let me know. I'll be at the hideout till tomorrow night. Then I'll take a pasear over to the Hat."

"Yes, Senor, and after the Hat?"

"The Bar B."

"I go to watch Hank Farger, Senor."

Blue Hawk pulled away and vanished into the night. Wayne Morgan continued on to the hideout. Once there, he dismounted and turned the gray into the little pasture. He patted Midnight's silken muzzle, then returned to the small fire he had built. It seemed that he relaxed for the first time since

[Turn page]

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he had come to Cavallo.

After he had stretched out on his blankets, he carefully checked over all he had learned. It was little, he admitted ruefully, but still and all he was some distance along the trail. If he could only learn what the mysterious shipments to the Rafter T contained and where those cases went from the renegade spread!

He grinned up at the stars, picturing fat Arch Cole combing the wide expanse of the badlands and malpais while he rested comfortably by the fire. The Cavallo lawman would be sore and proddy when he returned empty-handed to his jail. The Masked Rider had shot down two of the Six Trails and the remaining four would make Cole's life miserable. Still grinning at the mental picture of the miserable fat sheriff, Wayne Morgan went to sleep. . . .

Early sunlight awakened him. He went to the narrow entrance of the hideout, mounted on the gray. Cautiously he scouted around in a wide circle that covered several miles. There was no sign of the posse.

Wayne Morgan returned, unsaddled the horse, and prepared his simple breakfast. Afterward, he set himself to wait out the day patiently.

By nightfall he was completely rested and eager to ride the trails again. He had cleaned his guns, checked the loads, filled the empty loops in his belt. As soon as the first long shadows crept into the canyon, he roped and saddled the gray. Blue Hawk had not reported, so Morgan assumed that nothing had happened to Cavallo.

He lined out toward the Hat, keeping a wary eye ahead for any sign of the sheriff's posse. The malpais seemed deserted and Morgan struck no trails that looked fresh. His confidence mounted as he rode along. Cole had probably gone back to Cavallo for more supplies and orders from the Four Trails.

The Hat lights winked a cheery and friendly greeting through the dark as Morgan rode up. Just outside the yard he was sharply challenged by a cowboy who passed him when Morgan identified himself. The foreman came out of the house as Morgan dismounted.

"Where's Miss Helen?" Morgan asked.

"She ain't rode in yet," the foreman answered in a worried tone. "She rode over to the Bar B. I'm about ready to send a couple of the boys over there."

"Mebbe she and Dan Barth wouldn't like that," Morgan suggested.

"Might not," the foreman answered, with a grin. "Say, Arch Cole was lookin' for yuh last night. Seemed right anxious to find yuh. Morgan, yuh done made a monkey out of our law in these parts."

"It wasn't hard to do," Morgan chuckled. "Can I talk to old Hal?"

"Go on in. The Old Man's feeling chipper and r'arin' to get out of bed. Yuh know where he is."

The foreman walked off toward the bunkhouse.

When Wayne Morgan entered the bedroom, Hal's old eyes lighted. The rancher was propped high on pillows and the bandages made his chest seem thick and barrel-like. His wrinkled face broke in a pleased grin.

"Howdy, Morgan. I've done been deserted by that gal of mine. She's gone courtin' over Bar B way."

MORGAN pulled a chair up to the bed. Hal Bledso looked definitely on the mend. It was amazing the vitality these old whang-leather ranchers seemed to have. Morgan chatted aimlessly with him for a while, then brought the conversation around to the Hat.

"Ain't been nobody out here to tell yuh to pay yore note has there?"

Hal shook his head. "Nope, and they better not. I got the dinero, but this punctured hide of mine kept me from goin' to the bank."

"If anybody else beside Hard Pearson's bank held that note, I wouldn't worry," Morgan replied slowly. "Of course, legally, it was up to you to get that money to the bank the date the payment was due. Now they can demand the full debt or foreclose."

"Yuh shore are a cheerful cuss to be around a sick man," Hal Bledso grunted. "Reckon they will?"

"Not right away, mebbe. Send Helen into Cavallo tomorrow. The sidewinders is plumb upset again since the Masked Rider killed Kansas Blacky. He was ready to force yuh off the place."

They heard a challenge outside, then a rider came into the yard. His spurs jingled down the hall and Dan Barth came into the room. He grinned at the two men.

"Howdy, Hal. I see Cole missed yuh, Morgan. Where's Helen?"

Morgan stiflened and Hal's mouth dropped open. The old man gulped and his fingers clenched on the bed covers. He caught his breath.

"Ain't she with you?"

"No. I ain't seen her for a couple of days."

Hal's stricken eyes turned to Morgan. The cowboy had risen, his blue eyes hard. Dan Barth sensed something was wrong. He looked quickly from one to the other.

"Where is she?" he demanded.

"We thought she was with you," Morgan answered slowly. "She started out for yore spread. Yuh've been there all day?"

"Haven't left the place." Barth took a long stride into the room. His fist clenched. "Somethin's happened to her! They've killed her!"

Morgan shook his head. "Now don't

tangle yore loop, Dan. Mebbe she had some trouble."

"Shore! Them renegades have got her!"

"Mebbe," Wayne Morgan said soberly. "We'll find out."

He circled Barth and ran down the hall. Outside he called for the foreman. The man listened with growing excitement as Morgan told him what Dan Barth had said. He turned on his heel and ran shouting toward the bunkhouse. The hands came tumbling out the door.

CHAPTER X

Powdersmoke Rescue

IN A FEW minutes the Hat hands were ready to ride. They sat restlessly in their saddles waiting for Morgan and Dan Barth to come out of the house where they were talking to Hal Bledso. The old man had to be forcibly restrained from getting out of bed and riding with them.

At last the two young men came out and ran for their horses. They brought up short when two horsemen came riding in.

It was the cowboy guard and ahead of him rode a squint-eyed, pock-marked breed. The man was obviously frightened and kept eyeing the six the cowboy held lined on his back.

"This hombre says he's got a message for Hal," the cowboy explained. "I brought him right in."

Dan Barth held out his hand. "Give me the message."

"No, senor, eet is for the Senor Bledso. Only to heem."

The man was stubborn, though his dark eyes rolled toward the grim line of cowboys. Barth cursed and reached up to pull the breed from the saddle. Morgan halted him.

"Let him tell Hal. We can listen."

Barth stepped back and the breed slipped to the ground. The two men led him inside and to the bedroom. Hal Bledso glared at the dark, evil face and his lips set in a straight line.

"Message for me, huh? All right, what do them rattlesnakes want?"

The breed nervously clutched his ragged sombrero.

"The senorita, she ees safe. She ees hidden well."

Barth made an angry gesture toward his holstered gun and the breed cringed. Wayne Morgan quickly spoke up.

"You won't be hurt. Say yore piece and talk fast."

"Si, si, senor. Eet is that I know nothings. I tell what I am say to tell, that ees all."

"Who sent yuh?"

"Senor Jason. He say the senorita ees return when the Hat rancheria ees move out. All, everybody, all the vaqueros. You have heem three days to move."

"If we don't?" Hal Bledso blazed.

The breed shrugged. "I know not, senor. I was not told heem. Senor Jason say the Hat she watched. He know when you move out. You geeve paper to Senor Pearson een Cavallo. That ees all, senors. I go now, no?"

"In a minute," Morgan said. "Yuh wait outside the house. We'll have a message for yuh."

The man bobbed his head and scuttled from the room. Dan Barth exploded and Hal Bledso looked at Morgan as though he felt the man had lost his senses. Morgan understood and shrugged his wide shoulders.

"I'm not loco, gents. I just savvy what's happened. I know where Miss Helen is and I gamble I'm not wrong."

"Then what are we waitin' for?" Dan Barth asked. "Let's go get her."

"No, Dan, they'll be expecting that move. Yuh'll all get killed or shot up and Miss Helen's life won't be worth a plugged peso. Yuh leave it to me."

"What do yuh plan to do?" Hal Bledso asked.

"When the Masked Rider sent Kansas Blacky to Boot Hill, he took the real brains out of the Six Trails. What's left is the renegades, the jaspers that use a six instead of their heads, kidnapin' a girl instead of forcin' yuh out legal, Bledso. Kansas was the only lawyer in Cavallo, and for some reason the remains of the Six ain't waitin' to find another shyster. They're tryin' to use force."

"We know that!" Barth snapped.

"I reckon I know where Miss Helen is," Wayne Morgan repeated. "I'm goin' after her. Call in that breed, Hal, and tell him yuh want to think things over. Tell him to come back in the mornin' for yore answer."

"I'm not leavin' the Hat," Bledso stated firmly.

"Of course not. Yuh're just easin' things so's I can get to work. If I'm not here in the mornin' with Helen, yuh can take to gunsmoke. Is that fair enough?"

"Why not now?" Barth asked. His face was drawn and strained. "I can't stand the thought of Helen in their filthy hands."

"They ain't hurtin' her yet, Dan. They don't dare to. If I ain't here tomorrow, you can come blastin'. But I got to have yore promise to wait that long."

DAN BARTH strode up and down the little room. Finally Hal Bledso cleared his throat.

"I'll go along, Morgan," And he said to the young rancher: "Dan, I reckon he knows what he's doin'."

"Just till dawn," Dan Barth finally surrendered.

Morgan smiled grimly and picked up his hat.

"Good. If I ain't here by dawn, ride to the Rafter T and hit it fast and hard."

"The Rafter T!" Hal exploded. "Trego's dead!"

"But what's left carry on," Morgan answered swiftly. "They got Miss Helen there. I'll see yuh in the mornin'. Adios."

He swung down the hall and his spurs jingled musically. Dan Barth stared at the old man and then, with an impatient oath, he started for the door. Bledso's command brought him up short.

"Don't do it, Dan. Yuh gave yore promise and that gun slinger of yores knows what he's doin'. I reckon he'll be back like he said with Helen. If he ain't, there won't be no Rafter T tomorrow night!"

Outside the bedroom, Morgan ran from the house and vaulted into the gray's saddle. The cowboys held the breed prisoner and Morgan told them to send the man into the house. He neck-reined the gray and spurred away toward the Rafter T.

He had not gone far when Blue Hawk rode out of the night, leading Midnight. Morgan's eyes took in the black stallion in surprise.

"What's up?" he asked.

"Farger moves wagons again," Blue Hawk answered gruffly. "I steal the roan back. He's at the hideout. I think the Masked Rider comes maybe."

"Farger!" Morgan exclaimed. "Then the breeds will be comin' from below the Border again and hittin' the ranches. We got to move fast, Blue Hawk."

He quickly explained about Helen Bledso's kidnaping and the ultimatum the Trails had given to the Hat. Blue Hawk quietly listened, nodding from time to time.

"The Trails are worried," he said when Morgan finished. "They start making mistakes."

"They are," Morgan agreed, "but we got to act fast to make 'em count. First thing, the Bledso girl has to be rescued before Farger's wagons get to the Rafter T or before them bandidos come up from the Border."

He dismounted from the gray and untied the bed-roll from Midnight's cantle. Working swiftly, he donned the black cloak, mask and hat of the Masked Rider, and swung up on Midnight's back.

"Bring the gray for the girl," he told Blue Hawk. "Let's ride."

They sped off like the wind toward the Rafter T. It was a wild ride. Both were certain that the bandits were approaching the Border even now and they dared not be caught on the renegade spread when the breed riflemen rode in.

Though impatient for more speed, the Masked Rider held Midnight to a pace that would let Blue Hawk and the gray keep up with the stallion. They finally drew rein overlooking the Rafter T.

A few lights blinked at them. The Masked Rider stared down at the spread and his eyes grew cold behind the slits of the black mask.

"I figger they're keepin' her in that tool-house," he said. "Take yore man quiet, Blue Hawk. No noise."

"Yes, Senor," the Yaqui answered and touched his sheath knife.

They rode in close and then worked around to approach the tool-shed from the rear. Finally they dismounted and crept forward, hidden by the darkness.

The Masked Rider stopped, touched Blue Hawk's arm. A match flared up ahead, then went out. A cigarette glowed redly in the night.

"Guard front and back," the Masked Rider breathed. "That one's yores. I'll get the one at the door."

"Yes, Senor," Blue Hawk breathed. "The girl must be there."

The Masked Rider cut away to approach the tool-house from an angle that would conceal him from the guard at the back. He knew the guard would be a menace only so long as it took the Yaqui to creep up and strike.

Moving silently, the Masked Rider reached the side of the adobe hut. He could see the big, dark structure across the wide yard. A lamp glowed in the ranchhouse and he had a glimpse of Chips Jason. A guitar was being strummed in the bunkhouse.

THE Masked Rider edged to the front corner of the tool-house and peered around.

The guard leaned against the plank door, looking away from the masked man. A slight scuffle sounded, a low grunt and a thud. The Masked Rider's lips set. Blue Hawk had struck.

The other guard stiffened, alert to the sound. He pulled his six from leather and went to the far corner, peering around it into the darkness.

"Jed?" he called in a low voice.

A dark shadow whipped across the front of the hut. Starlight gleamed on blue steel, then the Colt barrel struck the guard's head. He fell without a sound, arms outspread. His gun bounced off into the darkness.

Blue Hawk materialized.

"Good!" he grunted softly. "Now inside, Senor. I watch."

The Masked Rider searched the fallen guard's pockets. He found the key and turned to the padlocked chain. He muffled the lock so that it made no sound when it fell open, carefully easing the chain so the links would no clink together.

"Miss Helen?" he said softly in the darkness when he opened the door. "I've come

from the Hat and Dan Barth."

He heard her dress rustle and then her hand gripped his sleeve. He swiftly led her outside. Helen took a startled look at the black mask and cloak, then she smiled.

"I'll never be able to thank you," she said.

"Yuh can thank me now by goin' with Blue Hawk here. He'll take yuh home."

The Indian silently led the way around the corner of the adobe. Just before they cut away from the ranch yard, the Masked Rider looked back over his shoulder at the big barn. He halted and Blue Hawk hissed a warning.

"Get her to the hosses, Blue Hawk. I'll join yuh in a minute."

He slipped back across the yard to the wide, closed doors. The padlock and chain were in place and the mystery of the building's content was just as baffling as ever. He had an impulse to shoot off the lock but instantly dismissed it. The shot would bring the Rafter T hands swarming out and he dared not run the risk.

He turned, and in long strides reached the porch of the ranchhouse. Gently pushing open the door he stepped inside, looking once more down the long hall to the lighted front room. He took a light step forward.

Something moved at his side and he whirled, hands stabbing down to his guns. A hard muzzle was jabbed into his stomach, freezing him in mid-motion.

"Lift 'em high, hombre!" Chips Jason's low, deadly voice came out of the darknesss. "I saw yuh slippin' toward the house from the barn. I waited for yuh."

The Masked Rider raised his arms. Chips had not seen the rescue of Helen Bledso and the Masked Rider was thankful for that. Jason chuckled and the sound was menacing.

"Into the other room there, hombre, where the light can strike yuh. I reckon I'll take a look-see at the Masked Rider's face."

The masked man turned and walked steadily into the lighted room. Jason kept his gun barrel in his captive's back. At the gambler's clipped command, the Masked Rider turned. Jason looked at the masked face.

"Take it off," he ordered.

The blue eyes glinted icily. Slowly the Masked Rider's arms dropped behind the black Stetson. Chips Jason leaned slightly forward, tense. His Colt muzzle lowered slightly. The Masked Rider's fingers seemed to fumble at the band that held the mask.

His hand gripped the black hat. Abruptly it sailed directly into Jason's face.

The gambler stumbled backward and sheer reflex action caused him to pull the trigger. The slug was wild. He caught himself, face flaming red in anger, lips snarled back like a fighting beast's.

The Masked Rider's Colt blasted as Jason's finger whitened around the trigger of his own six. Blood gushed from the gambler's throat and his hands opened spasmodically.

The Masked Rider snatched up his hat even as the man fell full length to the floor. The lamp was snuffed out and the Masked Rider jumped to the front door. He stood just outside a moment, listening to the shouts from the bunkhouse.

He ran into the night, keeping the house between himself and the Rafter T waddies streaming to the aid of their leader. Well clear of the yard, the Masked Rider cut away at a sharp angle. He had to get away from these renegades now!

CHAPTER XI

Battle at the Rafter T

BLUE HAWK was waiting for the Masked Rider, calm and alert, but Helen Bledso clearly showed her nervousness. The Robin Hood outlaw vaulted to Midnight's saddle and the three rode swiftly away from the Rafter T.

At the top of a long ascent, the Masked Rider reined in. The three looked back at the renegade spread. Lights had sprung up everywhere.

"What happened?" Helen Bledso asked breathlessly.

"Chips Jason went to Boot Hill," the Masked Rider answered calmly. "That leaves three—Texas Bowen, Hard Pearson and Hank Farger. I warned them all to rattle their hocks out of Cavallo."

"They come searching soon," Blue Hawk said.

"I don't think so. Farger's due in, and the breeds from the Border. The men down there haven't got a leader right now. They'll boil around and get nowhere."

"You're right," Helen said swiftly. "I heard Jason talking to the guard. They plan to send something over the Border. I don't know what."

"It's in the big adobe, whatever it is," the Masked Rider answered. "Yuh say Jason mentioned crossin' the Border with the load?"

"Yes, he did. They're waiting for Hank Farger."

"Then I know their secret," the Masked Rider said quietly. "There's only one thing that would bring them breeds north to attack the ranches. Blue Hawk, take Miss Helen to the Hat. I'm ridin' to the Bar B and get some gun hands."

"Wait!" Helen said sharply. "I don't know who you are, but I must thank you for helping me."

The black hat was swept off and the Masked Rider bowed slightly.

"No thanks due, ma'am. Yore smile is enough. Now yuh'd better ride with Blue

Hawk. Adios."

He wheeled Midnight and rode away toward the Bar B, black cloak billowing behind his upright, supple figure. The pounding hoofs of the stallion ate up the distance and the Masked Rider urged the horse to greater speed. Finally he saw the glow of lamps from the Bar B. Without hesitation he pounded into the yard.

The cowboys came out to face the blue-steel twin guns that steadily menaced them. The Masked Rider's hoarse voice spoke quickly.

"These sixes are to keep yuh from makin' any mistakes. I'm Dan Barth's friend and I've been fightin' the Six Trails. I got a job for yuh tonight."

"We've heard of yuh," a man said, "and we know how yuh've helped Dan and the rest. Name the job and we'll do her."

"Good!" The Masked Rider holstered the guns. "Saddle up and ride with me to the Hat. Dan's there, and we're hittin' the Rafter T. There'll be no more raids on the ranches after tonight."

The bunched cowboys broke, pushing back into the bunkhouse for rifles and gun-belts. The Masked Rider waited impatiently while they ran to the corral to rope their horses. In his mind he could only too clearly see the bandit bands fanning out boldly from the Rafter T.

At last the Bar B men were ready and the Masked Rider silently lined out for the Hat. Blue Hawk and Helen Bledso would have reached there long before now, and Barth would be expecting Wayne Morgan to report.

The dark land wheeled by the fast-running band of bunched horsemen. The pace was too fast for talk, and none was needed. The Masked Rider could sense the excitement and tension that gripped the men who rode at his heels.

They came over the last ridge and streamed down toward the lights of the Hat. As they swept into the ranch yard Dan Barth ran out of the house, waving his arms and yelling something unintelligible. Helen Bledso appeared at the door.

The Masked Rider swung out of the saddle and strode toward the young Bar B owner.

Dan Barth's face showed alarm and he made a quick gesture for the Masked Rider to go back.

Helen was suddenly shoved from the door. Arch Cole's fat bulk filled the space in the frame.

He held a Colt steady on the Masked Rider. His piggy eyes glinted and his thick lips curled back in a pleased grin.

"Well, if it ain't the gent with the big reward on his hide. Stand hitched, hombre. I aim to collect me some bounty on yuh alive or dead and I ain't carin' much how."

THE Masked Rider halted, hands splayed out over his guns. The eyes behind the slits cut quickly to left and right. Evidently Cole had ridden alone out to the Hat for none of his possemen were in the yard.

The fat sheriff stepped clear of the door, Colt still leveled. Barth wheeled around to face him.

"Cole, yuh're makin' a mistake."

"Mistake, cuss yuh!" Cole blasted. "He's the Masked Rider, ain't he? He's a wanted outlaw all over the West and there's a heap of dinero on his head. I aim to get it. Besides, he killed Trego and Kansas Blacky—"

"—and Chip Jason this evenin'," the Masked Rider broke in evenly.

Cole flinched as though he had been struck by a fist. His mouth opened in an O of surprise and he seemed to gasp for breath. The surprise quickly faded before the onrush of angry red into his fat jowls. His eyes narrowed evilly.

"Yuh confess to another murder?"

"Not a murder, Cole. Jason had the same chance for his sixes that Blacky and Trego had. All three of them was just a touch slow."

"It was murder!" Cole snapped. "I'm takin' yuh in."

He stepped closer to the Masked Rider and his fat hand groped back in his hip pocket for the handcuffs. Blue Hawk's hand made a quick flipping motion and the sheath knife cut through the air. The blade sank deep in Cole's gun arm. The sheriff howled in agony. The six dropped.

Instantly the Masked Rider stepped in. His fist whipped in a short pistonlike stroke that cracked loudly off the lawman's chin. Cole's head snapped backward and he started crumbling at the knees. He hit the ground with a bone-shaking thud and lay still.

The Masked Rider scooped up Cole's six. He rolled the barrel body over, got the handcuffs and snapped them around the lawman's thick wrists.

"Pour some water on his face," he ordered a gaping cowboy, "and tie up that arm. He's ridin' with us."

"Where?" Dan Barth asked. He looked around at his men. "Why did yuh bring my hands to the Hat?"

"Inside," the Masked Rider snapped. "I haven't much time left and we got to act fast."

He herded them into the house.

Hal Bledso stared at the masked figure as the Robin Hood outlaw followed Barth and Helen into the sick-room. Blue Hawk quietly slipped inside and took a stand near the door. The old rancher's eyes wrinkled and his thin mouth spread in a welcoming grin. The Masked Rider's quick gesture silenced him.

"We're riding to the Rafter T, Barth," he said to the young rancher. "I'm takin' all yore hands and most of the Hat's." The

blue eyes behind the mask cut to the bed. "Think yuh can hold off a raid with just a few men?"

"Raid?" Bledso asked. "Here again?"

"Breeds from below the Border. That's why I want to ride fast before they nail us down as they have in the past. That's the reason for the raids, Bledso. They keep you so busy here yuh don't wander over the range and see what yuh're not supposed to."

"Yuh talk in riddles," Barth snapped.

"Mebbe. But the answer's at the Rafter T. The showdown yuh've been wantin' has come, Barth, if yuh move fast enough to get it."

Dan Barth grinned widely and touched his holstered six.

"Shucks, then let's ride. I reckon the Hat boys can hold things here. But what about my spread?"

"It has to take its chances. We need the men."

"You hit leather, Dan," Hal Bledso spoke up. "I reckon me and Helen can handle things."

"Good," the Masked Rider cut in. "Let's waste no more time. Come on, Barth. . . . Oh yes, we're takin' the good Sheriff Cole with us. He'll like to see what happens."

He wheeled and walked out of the room, Blue Hawk following close behind. Dan Barth swiftly took Helen in his arms and kissed her. Then he plunged after the Masked Rider.

Arch Cole had been brought around and his arm bandaged. He sat his horse, glowering and cursing, swearing to have everyone in sight in jail by morning. His curses subsided when the Masked Rider emerged.

Barth called for his horse while the Masked Rider mounted Midnight.

They lined out toward the Rafter T, the Masked Rider and Dan Barth heading the cavalcade. They set a fast pace, but the Masked Rider led them in a wide arc away from the direct trail. Barth instantly noted that.

"We want to miss the breeds headin' this way," the Masked Rider answered his query. "If we get in a fight with 'em, we'll miss the big game at the Rafter T. It would be just like the hole-up at the Hat."

BARTH fell silent.

The miles steadily wheeled behind them. Circling wide had proved to be wise. If any breed bands were out, the cowboys did not run into them. Arch Cole was kept too busy riding to curse any more, but his fat face was a study in baffled anger.

At last the Masked Rider held his arm high as a signal and drew up. The rest clustered around him.

"Over the next ridge is the Rafter T," he explained in short, clipped words. "Spread out and ride up slow to the top of the ridge. Make no move till I give the signal. When that comes, strike hard with all yuh've got. They'll be slingin' a heap of lead but we'll have surprise on our side. Savvy?"

A muttered, low chorus of agreement answered him.

The Masked Rider took the reins of Arch Cole's horse and signaled Dan Barth to stay close. The cowboys spread out, then advanced cautiously up the slope.

The Rafter T was a blaze of lights, as the Masked Rider had expected. Three of Farger's big freight wagons were in the yard. The doors of the big adobe were wide open and men were carrying long wooden cases to more workers who stacked them in the wagons. A group of riders with high, peeked sombreros and crossed bandoliers loafed close to the wagon, smoking cigarettes and watching the loading. Dan Barth turned a puzzled face to the Masked Rider.

"What are they doin'?"

"Mebbe Arch Cole can answer that," the Masked Rider said quietly.

Cole shrugged. "I don't know nothin' about it," he growled.

"Yuh should, Cole. That's part of yore job, but the Six Trails paid yuh well to be blind to it, didn't they? It's because of this that yuh couldn't ever get on the trail of the raiders."

"Yuh're loco!" Cole answered, but his voice trembled a little.

Dan Barth stirred impatiently. "But what are they doin'? Why all the wagons and the armed guards?"

"South of the Border just beyond those hills there's all sorts of bandidos and renegades. Some of 'em are workin' in big bands, others alone, others pretend to be a 'revolutionary' army of one sort or other. But they're no more than robbers, thieves, murderers and rustlers. They need rifles and ammunition. Guns and bullets are hard to get, and the Six Trails made a business of furnishin' 'em."

Dan Barth whistled. "That's it! Those are cases of rifles they're loadin'."

"Right. The ammuntion boxes will come later. Farger had the freight line, Trego the Border ranch, Pearson the cash to buy armaments, and Kansas Blacky could twist the

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law around to serve their purpose. Bowen and Jason were the trigger men, the gunhawks and foremen on the job. Bowen's probably down there now along with Hank Farger."

"Let's hit 'em!" Barth said impatiently.

"Wait!" the Masked Rider snapped. "Let 'em load the wagons and line out for the Border. Right now, bands of breeds are shootin' up the Hat, the Circle Seven and yore Bar B spread, Dan. That's to keep pryin' eyes and attention away from here. The business is too big to take any chances of its bein' discovered. Down below is the secret of the Six Trails to Boot Hill."

"But why did they want the Hat?" Dan asked. "Why didn't they grab the Circle Seven after Frank Ewing was killed?"

"I'll have Arch or one of the Trails answer that later, Dan. . . . They're loaded! Get ready!"

Barth's eyes snapped back to the ranch. The last of the cases of ammunition had gone into the wagons. The light in the big barn went out and the doors were closed. The mounted bandits arced away their cigarettes and fell into position as the wagons started rumbling out of the yard.

The Masked Rider calmly drew his matched Colts. His eyes flicked along the ridge where the cowboys waited, impatient. Dan Barth's jaw set in a firm, fighting line.

A touch of the knees and midnight plunged forward. The Colts leveled down and thundered.

Instantly fighting men went into action along the whole ridge. The big crescent of thundering guns swept like an avenging wave down on the Rafter T. Below, instant pandemonium reigned. The mounted guards whirled their horses and guns winked back a deadly answer to the cowboy challenge.

BULLETS whistled close to the Masked Rider. A cowboy not far away threw his hands high and tumbled out of saddle. Below, the bandits had spurred around the wagons to form a protective screen. The big vehicles had not as yet got out of the yard, though the drivers lashed and cursed at the animals.

The Masked Rider's Colts concentrated on the drivers. The man in the first wagon dropped the reins and jack-knifed out of the high seat to the ground. The horses stopped, effectively blocking the two wagons behind.

From the buildings came the steady pound of Colts. The cowboy line charged down in a big sweeping arc. They hit the spread and the yard became an inferno of pounding hoofs, rearing horses, roaring guns. Into the hottest part of the battle the big black stallion carried his masked rider.

The blue Colts of the masked avenger belched flame, sending hot death tearing into the ranks of the bandits. The cold blue eyes swept to the wagons, deserted now by the drivers. Dan Barth, cheek bloodied by a grazing slug, was leading the Bar B men toward the wagons.

The attack had been carried out with stunning force and complete surprise. Before the bandits could organize any defense, they had been overwhelmed, many of their number knocked out of saddle.

They could take only so much of it. Abruptly they broke away, spurring their mounts toward the haven of the hills to the south.

CHAPTER XII

Cavallo Roundup

ONLY from the bunkhouse and the cookshack now came a few bullets from little knots of desperate men. The yard was almost empty of renegades. The Masked Rider halted Midnight and watched Dan Barth lead the cowboys to clean these last nests of resistance. It would soon all be over.

Blue Hawk came up, leading Arch Cole, protesting and white-faced.

"Fat sheriff tried to escape," Blue Hawk grunted. "I bring him along."

"Good." The Masked Rider smiled grimly. "He can make a few arrests around here, though mebbe he won't like to do it."

Suddenly the Masked Rider whirled Midnight around. He saw a big rider spur out of the shadows of the big barn and ride off in the direction of Cavallo. The Masked Rider bent low, urging Midnight to greater speed, riding at a tangent to cut off the escaping man.

The rider ahead, threw a quick look over his shoulder. It was either Pearson or Farger, the Masked Rider couldn't tell which. He saw only the dark, square shape and the white blur of the heavy face. The man's arm raised and a gun blasted. The slug passed close.

The Masked Rider's face set grimly and his hands slashed down to his Colts. A second bullet cut the black hat away from his head. The twin Colts snapped down and the Masked Rider rolled shots with stunning speed.

The man ahead doubled, slid sidewards in the saddle. His horse continued its pounding run, but the rider no longer could hold his seat. He tumbled, hit the ground, one spur still caught in the stirrup. The racing horse had gone several yards before the Masked Rider was able to catch the reins.

He jumped to the ground and released the dead man's boot from the stirrup. The big, square face was almost unrecognizable, a mass of blood and dirt. The Masked Rider cupped a match in his hands and wiped the

blood from one cheek. A crescent-shaped scar showed. Hank Farger was dead.

Blue Hawk came pounding up and the Masked Rider straightened. He looked back at the Rafter T. The last renegade sixes had been silenced. There would be no more guns run across the Border from Cavallo. Only the final showdown remained. Slowly the Masked Rider ejected shells from his Colts and reloaded.

"Get Dan Barth," he ordered Blue Hawk. "Have him and his boys bring them wagons to Cavallo along with the prisoners."

"The sheriff?" Blue Hawk asked.

"Bring him, too. Dan and a few of his boys had better ride ahead and meet me at the Bandido, pronto."

"Yes, Senor. Right away."

"Here. Load Farger on his hoss and take him in. That'll give Arch Cole somethin' more to think about. Tell Dan to burn leather to Cavallo if he wants a showdown with Bowen. I'm ridin' ahead and I won't wait too long."

Blue Hawk turned back to the Rafter T, riding fast behind him, Farger's body flopped across the saddle of the lead horse. The Masked Rider turned and mounted Midnight. The string had almost played out, the end lay not far ahead. . . .

In Cavallo, with no psychic sense to warn them that retribution had struck at the Rafter T, Hard Pearson and Texas Bowen loafed in the Bandido, sprawled at a card table over in one corner.

Now and then one of them would glance up at the clock. Bowen plainly showed the strain of waiting, but Pearson's square face looked as unemotional as a boulder. Bowen walked nervously to the bar, ordered a drink, then paced back to the table.

"Yuh'll wear yoreself out," Pearson grunted contemptuously. "Ain't no need to worry. We got everything covered."

"Mebbe," Bowen growled. "But I'd feel a heap better if that Masked Rider gent wasn't ridin' around somewheres."

"Farger knows what he's doin'," Pearson said flatly, "and Chips can take care of the Rafter T. The boys are hittin' the ranches and there ain't nothin' to stop them rifles goin' across to Mexico."

"The last of 'em," Bowen breathed. "I'll be glad to pull stakes, Hard. Blacky and Trego was mighty fast with sixes but the Masked Rider got 'em."

"Scared?" Hard Pearson demanded.

"Not exactly, Hard. Just careful."

BOTH fell into a morose silence. Again Bowen kept glancing up at the clock. Its hands moved slowly. He downed a drink and rubbed his sweaty hands on his trousers.

"Chips and Farger is plumb welcome to stay here," he said abruptly. "They figger to carry on alone once they force the Hat out. Might work."

"It will," Hard snapped. "I'm throwin' in with 'em."

"I'd rather collect my dinero and pull stakes." Bowen shook his head. "Ain't no money worth a wood slab in Boot Hill."

"Yuh're scared." Pearson twisted around and his hard eyes rested directly on Bowen. "I figger that Masked Rider bandit will fall in Arch Cole's hands pretty soon. The Bledso girl will force the Hat in our hands. It's the closest to the Rafter T and we run a risk from it. Any Hat rider that gets curious is a danger to us. But that will be gone. Bowen, we'll have all Cavallo like it was before and two less shares to divvy up between us."

[Turn page]

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"Sounds good," Bowen agreed, "but it ain't for me. I got an itch to go yonderly."

"Yuh're loco," Pearson grunted and craned his neck up at the clock. "Farger and his boys will just about be startin' over the Border. Chips will be in soon."

They heard riders come slowly down the street, but paid little attention until they stopped before the Bandido. A horse snorted, men said low words. Bowen twisted around and shot a quick glance at Pearson.

"Must be Chips and the Rafter T boys. I reckon they got the shipment off."

Pearson arose and went to join Shear behind the bar. The men would be thirsty. He had his white apron almost tied when the bat wings were slammed upon. He looked up as he heard Bowen's choked exclamation.

Dan Barth and the Bar B hands walked in. Pearson saw two Hat riders that he knew by sight. A warning bell jangled along his nerves. Something had gone wrong. These men should be fighting off raiders at this minute. He erased the sudden look of fear that had swept across his face.

"What's on yore mind, gents?" he asked with a cordiality he did not feel.

"Nothin', Pearson," Barth answered slowly. "We're waitin' for a gent. He'll be here any minute. The Masked Rider."

Bowen came half erect, caught the swift hard stare of the armed cowboys. Weakly he sank back in his chair and fumbled for the whisky bottle. Pearson's hand clenched tightly on the bar, but his face showed no emotion.

"What's that outlaw doin' here?" he asked.

Barth shrugged. "Cleanin' up, I reckon. By the way, Chips Jason and Hank Farger is dead. We got Arch Cole handcuffed outside to his hoss. Quite a shindig we had out at the Rafter T."

Bowen choked on his whisky, spewing it out of his thick lips. Pearson's square face became a sickly white and he sent a quick, sidelong glance toward Bowen. Dan Barth leaned back against the bar, facing Bowen. His hazel eyes were hard and bright and there was no concealing the hatred he held for the big gunman at the table.

The back door opened and Pearson wheeled around. The Masked Rider stood there, the mouth and chin showing firm and hard beneath the black mask. His cold blue eyes swept to Bowen and back to Barth.

"Wayne Morgan's waitin' outside," he said calmly. "He wanted a hand at these two jaspers but I argued him out of it. That wanderin' cowboy gave me a lot of information, Dan."

"He's been hidin' the last few days," Barth answered, never taking his eyes from Bowen.

The Masked Rider stepped into the room.

"Step out from behind the bar, Pearson," he ordered. "Here's the last two of the Six Trails to Boot Hill. I had hoped some of 'em would leave town before it was too late. But greedy men never take warnin'."

Bowen pushed himself up from the table.

"Cuss yuh! How did yuh savvy our plans?"

"I kept watch on the Six Trails. I found out that the raids was only to hide the real plot. I found out yuh wanted the Hat because it was too close to the Rafter T to suit yuh. Farger's freight wagons brought in mysterious cargoes to Trego's spread, more than could be explained by the need of the ranch alone. There was a lot of holes in the plan, Bowen. Gun rule and raids hid 'em for awhile. But it's over now."

"What do yuh intend to do with us?" Pearson demanded.

"I'm calling yuh, Pearson, like I promised I would. Bowen, Dan Barth had an argument with you to settle in gunsmoke. He never forgot Frank Ewing. Yuh can fill your hands, sidewinders, whenever yuh want to. We'll be waitin'."

PEARSON'S hard eyes slid to Bowen. The big gunslick licked his lips, half turned to face Dan Barth. A deep silence held the room, the cowboys pressed back out of the line of fire. The silence held and mounted as four pairs of eyes locked with one another across the room.

Bowen broke first. He cursed and his hand plunged down to his holster. Barth instantly dropped into a crouch, fingers clawing leather. Pearson's six snapped from the holster. The Masked Rider's hands blurred, then two Colts rocked in thundering roars.

Pearson was driven back against the bar by the slap of the slugs in his chest. He hung there a moment, then collapsed like an empty meal sack, his six clattering to the boards.

Bowen had fired first, but too hastily. His slug scarred the bar wood a scant inch from Barth's side. Dan Barth was a split second slower, but his bullet smashed between Bowen's close-set eyes. The man's head jerked back, and his body fell into the table. Renegade, table and whisky spilled to the floor. Bowen twitched and was still.

"That does it," Barth said slowly, holstering his iron. "I done evened the score, Frank. We all owe yuh thanks—"

He turned and stopped in mid-sentence. The Masked Rider was gone, vanished in the excitement.

Dan Barth looked around the room, puzzled. The bat wings swung open and Wayne Morgan came in. He looked at the dead men on the floor, then at Dan Barth. He looked disappointed.

"I shore missed out, but that Robin Hood outlaw gent was mighty persuadin'. He just left in an all-fired hurry, but he told me he wished yuh luck, all the Cavallo ranches."

Barth nodded thoughtfully. "We wish him luck." He faced the men in the room. "The Cavallo trouble is over and I reckon peace can come to the Malpais. The Six is all dead and we got their crooked lawman prisoner."

"Who'll take his place?" a Bar B hand asked.

Barth grinned. "Ain't but one man I know —that wanderin' gun slinger I hired. I shore nominate Wayne Morgan as Sheriff of Cavallo. I hope yuh take it."

He stopped again. Morgan was gone, the batwings swinging gently.

Barth jumped outside. Wayne Morgan and an Indian were riding away down the street. Morgan twisted around in his saddle and waved.

"Adios, friend. I done got itchy heels again. You marry that Miss Helen or I'll be back to try my own luck."

"Come back!" Barth called.

"Can't! There's trouble over yonderly and I got to see about it. Good luck, amigo."

The two riders disappeared into the night, heading for the badlands. Dan Barth stood silent before the Bandido, watching them go with a strange sense of regret.

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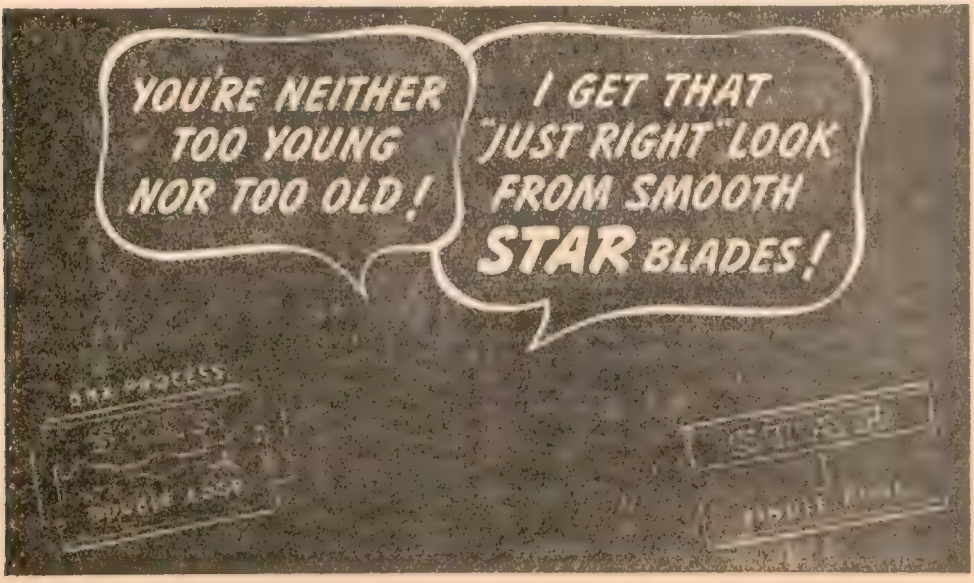

Crazy Jaimey poked his rifle through the window and fired at Brandt

THE ORPHAN

By DAVID X. MANNERS

Crocker City Was a Slam-Bang Town Until Bonny Wakefield's Tiny Hands Touched the Heart-Strings of Two of Its Toughest Hombres!

TIM BRANDT was afraid as he climbed the hotel's rickety stairs. His knees felt weak. A bright, dry glitter in his eyes matched the shine of the sheriff's star on his vest.

Big, tough Tim Brandt had beaten lawless crews single-handed in his time. He had tamed the wild frontier town of Crocker City practically alone. But now he knew he was licked by a seven-year-old girl!

Brandt moved hesitantly down the dimly-lit hallway to the room which the desk-clerk had told him was Bonny's. He reached for the doorknob, then stopped. He didn't know how to break the news to this child that her mother and daddy weren't coming back, that they had been killed in a fire which destroyed the Gilded Queen Opera House the night before.

Brandt's fist struck the door, and he

waited for an answer from the little girl. Bonny had come to town with her mother and dad who were actors in the show at the Gilded Queen. Only yesterday Brandt had seen her safely back to her folks after a derelict called Crazy Jaimey had stopped to speak to her while she played in Crocker City's dusty street. It had given Brandt a feeling he hadn't had in years, bending down beside little Bonny and touching her hair.

Brandt's fist knocked on Bonny's door again. The sound echoed in the dim passage. Quickly he debated what he would say, what he would do if the little girl would start to cry.

The echoes of the knocking stilled, but there was no answer. Brandt knocked once again. He waited a moment longer. Then he grasped the knob and shoved inside.

The enameled-iron bed was mussed and unmade. Dresser drawers were ripped open. A trunk stood in one corner, its contents dragged out. An array of dresses and theatrical costumes were scattered on the floor, their spangles glistening in the early morning sunlight which was streaming in through the windows.

"Kid!" Brandt called, tentatively. "Hey, Kid! Bonny!"

The walls returned the vibration of his deep bass. Brandt opened a closet door to find the closet empty.

"Kid!" Brandt called again.

He moved out into the hallway. Nervously, he fingered a cheroot from his vest. There was a door at the end of the hall, leading to an outside stairway. He studied the fact that the door was open. Then he thought of Jaimey, the crazy derelict, speaking so interestedly to Bonny in the streets the day before. Brandt's thoughts clicked together, arranged themselves into a decision. He bet he knew where Bonny was!

BRANDT was untying his piebald from the hitchrack in front of the hotel when a voice spoke behind him.

"How'd she take it, Sheriff?"

Brandt turned and saw the face of Shiny Jack. Shiny Jack had been present, as had most of the town, when the Gilded Queen burned down. Shiny Jack wore the string tie and broadcloth coat of the frontier gambler. His young eyes were agate and a long scar on his cheek evidenced the turbulence of his past. Shiny Jack could be smart at cards, but it was common knowledge that he preferred the easier way of rolling his victims.

Brandt did not answer Shiny Jack's question, but his look told the gambler clearly that he didn't want to be bothered with him. Brandt knew the gambler hated him as a symbol of law and was only trying to taunt and make fun of him. That was the way of most everyone in Crocker City. A man who tamed a town had few friends left when the taming was done. It had been the fate of Bat Masterson in Dodge City, of the Earps in Tombstone, of Wild Bill Hickok in Abilene and Deadwood.

Shiny Jack's grin showed his teeth. "I've heard tell, Tim, that you was married once yourself." The gambler was still seeking a wedge for his taunts.

Brandt ignored him. He climbed into the saddle, swung away from the rack, and spurred up the dusty street. His eyes looked straight ahead as he passed the still smouldering ruins of the Gilded Queen.

Brandt left the trail at a valley pocket. He followed on down for a hundred yards, then quartered in cautiously toward the front of a shack, rounding a pile of refuse and trash. Here he stopped.

"Jaimey!" he hailed. "Hey, Jaimey!"

There was no answer. Two crows flapped upward from the sagging ridgepole of a barn behind the shack.

Brandt dismounted, dropped his reins. He adjusted the gunbelt about his middle, lumbered toward the door of the shack.

"Stay right where yuh are!"

The voice spoke with startling suddenness. Brandt jerked to a stop, his massive head thrown back. He saw a face at the shack's window—the pale, bearded face of Crazy Jaimey.

"I've come for that kid, Jaimey," Tim Brandt said. "Yuh know what I want."

"Kid? What kid? Ain't no kid here. Whose kid yuh talkin' about, Sheriff?" The voice was emphatically innocent, disarming.

"You know what kid I mean, Jaimey. Don't rile me now. Yuh heard her folks was killed in the fire, and yuh busted into the hotel, took her."

Jaimey laughed shortly. "Ain't been hide ner hair of no kid around here, Sheriff. Somebody's been tellin' yuh a dog-watch tale!"

Brandt made a sudden move toward the door of the shack. There was a quick

tinkle of falling glass, rifle poked through the pane and was fired almost at the same instant. Brandt jerked back and missed the slug that flew past his ear. Then he whipped up his own gun.

"Stay there, Sheriff. Don't come no fu'ther! She's my kid, I tell yuh! And I ain't givin' her up!"

The door of the shack opened and Jaimey stepped outside, the rifle at ready in his arms. He tried to draw the door shut after him with the toe of his boot, but before he could do so a tiny figure darted out. Bonny ran to him and threw her two thin arms desperately about one leg of his raggedy pants. Jaimey's left hand went down, touched the girl's head, caught it to him, protectively.

Crazy Jaimey's height melted off at the shoulders, and his head thrust forward in a stoop. Dirty red hair hung disheveled over his ears and neck. A bristly growth grimed his face. Jumper, shirt, pants—nothing had been off him in months. Against Jaimey, the girl looked like a pale, fragile piece of store china.

Brandt blinked his eyes, threw away his cheroot. He was taken aback by this unexpected opposition, by the seeming reliance with which the girl clung to this scare-crow of a man. Outside of this child, there was no one who had ever shown Jaimey anything better than remote tolerance.

"Look now—" Brandt began. If force wouldn't work, he was willing to try another tack. "I don't mean no harm, Jaimey. You can have the kid all right. Sure yuh can. But don't yuh see, it's got to be done legal and proper. Now, if yuh'll let me take her now—"

"Not much—yuh don't want her. Well, yuh don't get her! She's mine! And Heaven help the man who tries—" Jaimey's voice cracked, then broke with feeling.

Brandt made a placating gesture, took a casual step forward. Jaimey's hands gripped the rifle tensely. At Brandt's next step, Jaimey fired.

BRANDT leaped back.

"Jaimey! For Pete's sake."

"I'll kill any man who tries to take her from me. She's mine, I tell yuh!"

Brandt stopped, startled and puzzled by the fervor with which Jaimey held on to the littl girl. It was plain that cajolery would not win him an inch. A long silence stood between the two men, then Brandt turned to his piebald, mounted and rode slowly away.

He'd let the matter rest a while. There was really no hurry about it. He would return tomorrow, or the next day, when Jaimey had cooled a little. After all, the kid seemed safe enough.

But there was still something that troubled Brandt. Not something nameless and indescribable, but something real, vivid. Brandt left the trail just before he reached town. At a little knoll, he dismounted, climbed upward on foot to Crocker City's burial ground.

Hat clenched between his two massive hands, Brandt stopped at a grave, a smaller grave beside it. It had been a long time since he'd been here last. He hadn't wanted to come even now. He had to be hard and tough. It was a way of life he'd chosen—a feeble stockade against his loneliness, his pain The big stone bore the inscription: *Ella—beloved wife of Timothy Brandt. 1855-1873.* The smooth surface of the smaller stone was broken by one word: *Baby.*

Brandt stood silently by the graves, a numbness growing within him. This was from a past that was so long ago it seemed a different life to him. A life somehow revived by sight of that little girl clutching protectively to Jaimey's raggedy leg.

Brandt rode back to town, depression riding the saddle with him. Once more he passed the ruins of the Gilded Queen. He saw Shiny Jack standing on the boardwalk nearby.

"I hear tell the kid's gone," Shiny Jack called him. "Did Jaimey—?"

"He took a pot-shot at me!" Brandt said, wanting to unburden himself, no matter to whom. "He got her, and he won't let anyone touch her. I'm giving him till tomorrow to come to what little sense he's got—that crazy, gun-whipped fool!"

"Likely he imagines the kid's his," the gambler said smilingly. "Heard the other day it wasn't a gun-whipping that set him crazy, either. I hear Jaimey ain't always been the sorry gent he is now," he went on with relish. "Used to be married, and prosperous. But for some reason, Jaimey was away and his woman didn't have no proper treatment when the kid came. It set him going when he come home and found 'em both dead."

Brandt felt his face go pale.

"Well, I'm going out and get Bonny in the morning," he said.

But in the morning Brandt had to return a horsethief to a neighboring county. And on the following day there were some other things to be done. It wasn't until the third that Brandt slipped out of town to go to Jaimey's shack. He'd seen Jaimey's crowbait horse tied to the Mercantile rail, and so he knew the coast would be clear to get the kid.

Smoke was coming out of the shack's chimney when Brandt approached it. He went directly to the door, but it was locked. A goat, tied to a stake by a long rope, stared motionlessly at him from the rear ranchyard. Suddenly a tiny, piping voice made Brandt jump. He turned to the face pressed to the window.

"Hello," the voice said mischievously. "My name is Bonny. What's yours?"

"Why, uh—open the door," said Brandt, startled again by the abruptness of the question. He felt the awkardness of his big body.

"The door is locked," she said. "And I know you even if you won't tell me your name. You're the sheriff who took me back to my mommy and daddy the other day when I was playing in the street." She chattered effortlessly. "Oh, yes, the key. Uncle Jaimey hid the key, but I know where. Wait just a minnet till I fix somethin' on the stove."

IN a moment, the key turned in the lock. Bonny hurried away, as he opened the door. Her tiny hands caught a pot on the stove, and she bounced the spuds dry in the pot.

Brandt could see dinner was cooking on the stove. He looked beyond the window to where he had seen the goat. Then to where milk cooled in a bucket set on the back of the kitchen table.

He went to the girl, reaching out his hands for her frail, sweet shoulders—hands that had hanged the Peckinpaugh brothers at Raven Hill, that had blasted life from a five-man band of horse-thieves at Pilgrims' Crossing. Tenderness showed through the rock-ridges of his face.

"Uncle Jaimey has gone into town to mail a letter to my mommy and daddy," Bonny spoke eagerly. "I helped him write a long one to them last night."

"That's right, kid. Your mom and dad have gone away on a trip, haven't they?"

"My mommy and daddy are dead!" she blurted. There was a brave, defiant brightness in her eyes. "You won't tell Uncle Jaimey," she begged. "He doesn't know. He thinks—he thinks they're still all right. I wouldn't like to hurt poor, nice Uncle Jaimey."

She turned away to clean a mess of turnip parings. Brandt could only stand silently watching her.

Finally, she turned and pushed him toward the door, telling him he'd better go before Uncle Jaimey returned and found that she'd disobeyed and let some one in the house. Brandt did as she asked and he was out the door before he remembered that he had come to take Bonny away with him.

"Well, anyhow," he thought to himself, "I've laid the groundwork. I can get her away from Jaimey anytime I want to now."

As Brandt rode back down the trail, he saw a stranger approaching the shack, and he turned aside to watch. Then he realized that the stranger was Crazy Jaimey.

Jaimey had shaved. His red hair still was thick and coarse about his neck, but there had been some attempt to slick it down with water. He was no longer wearing the shirt that he had worn every day for months. In its place was a new shirt, the store creases still fresh on it. And propped in front of him on the saddle was a box filled with groceries.

A week went by and Brandt saw Crazy Jaimey in town a few times, and each time he went out to see how Bonny was getting along. He was confused, and didn't know quite what to do about the youngster. One thing was certain, however. The change in Crazy Jaimey was profound.

"Did you see the haircut I give Uncle Jaimey?" Bonny wanted to know the last time Brandt had visited her.

And there were other changes. Jaimey had gone to work, tightening and repairing fences about his place. He'd oiled, painted and straightened up the windmill back of the house. Cleaned away the trash heap. Brandt heard that he was buying fresh eggs for Bonny from the Widow Smith.

On Saturday night, Brandt went shopping at the Mercantile. And Sunday morning, when he saw Jaimey come into town, he made a hurried departure with a bundle tucked under his arm.

Beyond town, his trail crossed Shiny Jack's. Shiny Jack had a package hooked to his saddle horn.

"Just saw Crazy Jaimey in town," the gambler announced. "I figgered you was

going out to see the kid, and I'd tag along."

"Since when are you interested in kids?"

Shiny Jack face grinned. "You can never figger the tender effect a child will have on a hard man's heart," he said. "Say, look what's happened to Jaimey and to you! You know where Crazy Jaimey is right now—in church!"

Brandt fell silent. He didn't once look toward the gambler.

Shiny Jack baited him. "You did have a little girl once yourself, didn't you, Brandt?" he asked.

Brandt snapped. "I'm gettin' these things for the kid on'y because she needs 'em and they's nobody else to give 'em to her!"

Brandt had new shoes, a calico dress and a pink sweater for Bonny. He gave them to her gruffly, irritated and annoyed by Jack's presence. Shiny Jack brought her a stuffed rag doll, and a new, bouncing ball with things inside that jingled.

Brandt couldn't help but see the change that came over Shiny Jack when he played with Bonny. He bounced the ball with her, and it rolled under a shed. Shiny Jack crawled under after it, though the kid could have done it far more easily.

SHINY JACK was pale and excited when he crawled back out. He grabbed Brandt's sleeve the moment Bonny turned to go into the house to get a duster to clean him off.

"Cans!" he said hoarsely. "Cans of kerosene hid under there! And a lot of soft old rags!"

"Well, what about it?" Brandt stared at him.

"Do I have to tell you?" Shiny Jack demanded.

"If yuh're tryin' to say Crazy Jaimey burned down the Gilded Queen yuh're crazier than Jaimey ever was!"

At that moment Bonny returned. Shiny Jack said, "S'long, kid, we gotta go." And pulled Brandt toward their horses.

Away from the house, Jack took a grimy paper from his pocket and handed it to Brandt.

"Here," he said. "Tear this up into such little pieces that nobody'll ever find it!"

Brandt smoothed the paper and looked at it carefully. There he saw the plan of a building. At one end was a point marked "stage." At another end, "balcony." There were several places labelled "exit."

"I found it under the shed," Shiny Jack said. "Hidden with them cans. If you ask me, it looks like a plain frameup to blame Jaimey for the Gilded Queen fire."

Brandt fingered nervously in his vest for a black cheroot.

"Jaimey can't write," he said. "He couldn't have made that map. But who would want to frame him—and why?"

Brandt looked sharply, suspiciously at Jack, but the gambler shrugged.

"You'd better tear it up," he said again. "We wouldn't want poor Jaimey in trouble, would we?"

"No," Brandt said. He spaced the words carefully. "We wouldn't want Jaimey in trouble."

They rode back to town in silence. Brandt wondered as to who might want to frame anyone as harmless as Jaimey.

Brandt stayed in his office until late afternoon. He went out briefly then. A man was waiting on the porch in front of the office when Brandt returned.

He came forward when Brandt dismounted, racked his piebald.

"Sheriff Brandt?" he inquired. "My name is Wakefield. Ed Wakefield. I've come to see about my little girl."

There was a quality about the man that reminded Brandt of Shiny Jack. Brandt even had the vague feeling that he had seen Wakefield with the gambler at some time or other. The man was about forty. He had on a town coat, and shiny high boots which came up neatly almost to his knees.

A noise—a murmur familiar to him—caused Brandt to look down the street momentarily.

"She's my brother's girl," the man went on. "I'm Bonny Wakefield's uncle. Where is she?"

"Wait a minute," Brandt said. He stepped out into the dust of the street, squinted his eyes against the setting sun's glare. Men were running from Guilfoyle's saloon, shouting. They leaped astride horses, thundered off, guns and ropes held aloft in their clenched fists.

Wakefield paid no attention to the activity. He went right on.

"How's about the girl? Bet she won't recognize her ol' Uncle Ed. Ain't seen her in years. Spunky bit o' calico, I betcha."

Brandt ignored the man. More riders were leaving town at the end of the street.

Distantly, shots spanked the sky. Shiny Jack came out of Guilfoyle's, and Brandt ran toward him. The gambler saw Brandt coming, and tried to duck.

Brandt lunged at him, and his clubbed fist brought the man down in the street's dust. He dragged him up.

"What the devil goes on here? What have you been up to?" Brandt growled.

Shiny Jack tried to pull away. But Brandt shook him, and his fist caught the gambler hard on the side of the face. Jack stumbled backwards, and Brandt's left hand clutched tight at the gambler's coat. Brandt's fist struck out again, and Jack's knees sagged. Blood trickled out of the corner of his mouth. Brandt let him drop to the boardwalk.

Men coming out of Guilfoyle's stopped to stare, but none interfered. Shiny Jack scuttled backwards.

"Get up," Brandt commanded.

"Why, you big ox?" the gambler panted. "So you can beat me?"

"You planted those cans on Jaimey! You've started this mob going. Get up, and let me slap that crooked head of yores."

"What you so good about?" Shiny Jack snarled. "You know you're only in this yourself because of the money the girl's got."

Brandt dragged him up, drove him down again with a smash to the face. Shiny Jack had practically admitted he'd planted those cans! Brandt grabbed the gambler by one leg, dragged him down the street, as the red flare of fire lighted the sky to the east.

HALFWAY down the street Brandt met Wakefield. He saw the sudden, frightened jerk of the man's body, as he tried to dart away. Brandt grabbed him.

A few minutes later, Brandt left the jail behind with Wakefield and Shiny Jack locked in a cell. It was still not clear to him just how the two fitted in the picture, or what that picture was, but he'd attend to that later. There was other, more urgent, business now. He found his piebald and as he went by Guilfoyle's, he heard a sing-song chant:

"They're hanging Crazy Jaimey to the sour apple tree. They're . . ."

The smoke-yellow eastern sky flickered pink with wind-fanned embers. Brandt knew a huge bonfire had been built on the cottonwood ridge beyond town. Twilight was deepening into dusk when he came to the base of the ridge, looked up and saw the silhouetted shadows of the mob crowded about the tree. A thin black rope dangled like a plumb line from a stout bough. A half dozen men were clustered together, as if about to engage in a tug of war.

Tim Brandt gauged the distance, but he feared that he couldn't make it up the ridge in time. He dragged a long-rifle from his saddle scabbard and let go a shot, aimed high. It whistled through the tree tops.

Brandt's shot did not interrupt the mob in its work. He crowded up the hill, and let go another shot. This time men pulling out the rope slacked momentarily, their faces flat orange in the brightness of the fire.

Brandt leaped from his piebald and moved in. The mob surged about him and even for all his bulk he was momentarily lost in the sea of their movement. The men with the rope-end began to pull again.

Crazy Jaimey sagged between two men who were holding his arms.

The firelight glinted from his smooth-shaven face.

"Yo're jest in time to pull on the rope, Sheriff!" one shouted. "Sore because we didn't wait? Here's yore b'ar meat! Grab ahold!"

Sheriff Tim Brandt planted himself, faced them squarely.

"There's no hanging tonight," he said. "Let him go!"

"Let who go?" somebody roared. "This is the gent who torched the Gilded Queen!"

"Forget the big he-coon," another voice defied Brandt. "Throw him out, an' le's get on with the jig!"

Brandt's voice struggled to rise above the clamor.

"Listen here, Sheriff," one spidery man shouted grimly. "My best friend died in that fire, and we're hanging the crazy son who set it. Nobody's stopping us!"

"Jaimey set no fire," Brandt shouted back.

"He done it so he could get the kid! So he could get the money that's in her name at the bank!"

"Money?"

"Better'n five thousand dollars worth!" the answer came echoing back from half a dozen throats. "That's why he done it.

Torched the place so he could nab the kid."

There was a quick, growing movement to pull on the rope.

"Hold it!" Brandt shouted. So that was it. That was Shiny Jack's and his phony conferedate "Uncle" Wakefield's stake in this. They were after Bonny's money.

"Yuh're all loco," Brandt said. "There was a few hundred people in the Queen when she burned. How could a man figger to get just them he wanted dead by torchin' it? Yuh don't go about killin' anybody that way."

"But he's crazy!" The answers spouted from all directions. "Go down to th' bank an' you'll find out that kid's worth thousands o' dollars," one cried. "He wanted her, and he wanted her cash. Where'd he get the coin he's spendin' now, else?" another of the mob yelled.

Brandt swayed with momentary weakness, fearful that here might be a mob he could not tame into submission.

"I don't need to go to the bank," he said slowly, carefully, picking up one word at a time. "I don't need to go because I got the kid's bankbook right here with me now!"

NO ONE saw Brandt's hand go into his pocket. They saw only that it had come out, and in it was a thin, black book.

He held it in his right hand and thumbed open its pages.

"Sure the kid's got money in the bank. Plenty of it. But who put it there?" His voice grew unnaturally soft, appealing. "A man who once made a grubstake back in the Superstitions. A rich stake. A man who lost his wife and kid—and then lost his mind. Who became like an animal, a crazy animal who didn't know what was right or decent or proper, or how to live with other folks.

"The money he had didn't mean anythin' to him; he didn't know what it was for. But a kid taught him. A little kid he watched playin' in the street. She taught him how loneliness, and hate, and misery—and everything else could be beat. That's why he had that money put in her name. Doin' it, he saw hisself bein' made a man again."

"Jaimey!" someone whispered.

There was silence, the shifting uncertainty of the mob, black in the night and flecked with orange from the waning fire.

Then someone yelled, "Hogwash! That ain't the way we heerd it. Le's git on with the necktyin', boys! If Jaimey put that money in the bank fer the kid, whyn't he say so? Why'd he say he didn't know nothin' about it? Why didn't he talk to save his skin?"

"Because he was likely too mad to say anything. Yuh don't need to take my word. Here's the book! Look at the date. That money has been in the bank for her for just three days, yuh fools!"

Tension relaxed noticeably. A few men turned away before Brandt's bellowing forcefulness. Then the spidery man shouted. "I don't believe a blasted word yuh're sayin'. Lemme see that book!"

It was echoed. "Yeah, le's see th' book! Le's get on with the necktyin'!"

Tim Brandt stepped forward, the book in his hand. A man crowded forward to see, the man who had spoken last. Brandt's fist struck him squarely, and the man tottered back. Brandt stood ready, planted, his huge fist balled. He placed himself between Crazy Jaimey and the men who would pull on the rope.

"Is this the way yuh pay off a gent who's jest found hisself? Who's jest done the first decent thing in years? Is this the break yuh give a gent who's jest one crawl outa the gutter and is tryin' to hold up his head? Is this—"

Again there was movement, meaning violence, in the crowd. Some still held the rope-end, stubbornly.

Then back in the crowd voices arose, and grudgingly, resentfully, they abandoned the rope.

The town's hate still confronted Brandt. But the lawman sensed that the backbone of the mob was broken. He had outtoughed them once again, beaten them down. In a town where the dregs and out-scourings of the West still grappled for power, it took methods that both the lawless and law-abiding despised, to hold the reins of law.

Balefully, they stared at him. Silently, they caught up their horses. Their hatred for Brandt, their master, was plain.

Tim Brandt was left alone with Crazy Jaimey. He brought his piebald around, helped Jaimey into the saddle.

"Why'd yuh do it?" Jaimey muttered. "Why'd yuh do it for me?"

"Get up on that saddle," Brandt ordered.

He took Jaimey home, and went inside the shack with him. He did not light the lamp. Bonny was asleep in the bed

Brandt had bought for her. The starlight, lancing the window, fell softly across the smooth mounds of her cheeks.

"She'll have schooling, and everything she wants," Brandt said so softly Jaimey didn't even hear. "That money was to have been for my baby. I'm glad Bonny'll have it. Too bad there ain't more I kin do."

Brandt looked down at the sleeping child for a long time, Jaimey standing right behind him. Suddenly he realized that Jaimey was watching him, had seen him blink the hot, dry smartness from his eyes. He turned angrily at him, with all his notorious belligerence.

"Well, what yuh want?" He glared. "What yuh standin' there for?"

Brandt's shoulders were limp as he rode alone back to town. He came to his office, and went in to sit in the swivel chair at his desk. He heard the stir in the back cell where Shiny Jack and his impostor uncle were spending the night. In the morning he'd tend to them, tend to them proper.

Brandt rubbed the knuckles on his great, thick fists. He did not turn on the office light. He just sat and thought. After a while he took the little black book out of his pocket and tossed it on the desk. It was a tally book, not a bank book. The bank book was in safekeeping for Bonny in a locked drawer where he'd put it after depositing that money in her name.

There hadn't been time to come back after that bankbook, and anyway the tally book had served just as well.

Brandt let go of a weary sigh and leaned back in his chair. It looked like he never would comb this curly wolf of a town.

Mining prospector Bob Carey trails a pack of Silver Gulch sidewinders—and stakes a claim in his future in MUD ON BOOTHILL, *by* E. E. HALLERAN, *Next Issue!*

Tired Kidneys Often Bring Sleepless Nights

Doctors say your kidneys contain 15 miles of tiny tubes or filters which help to purify the blood and keep you healthy. When they get tired and don't work right in the daytime, many people have to get up nights. Frequent or scanty passages with smarting and burning sometimes shows there is something wrong with your kidneys or bladder. Don't neglect this condition and lose valuable, restful sleep.

When disorder of kidney function permits poisonous matter to remain in your blood, it may also cause nagging backache, rheumatic pains, leg pains, loss of pep and energy, swelling, puffiness under the eyes, headaches and dizziness.

Don't wait! Ask your druggist for Doan's Pills, used successfully by millions for over 40 years. They give happy relief and will help the 15 miles of kidney tubes flush out poisonous waste from your blood. Get Doan's Pills.

(Adv.)

GUNSMITH'S HEADACHE

By SAM BRANT

Matt Lampton Ferrets Out Trouble in Cactus Bend!

ALL THE familiar night sounds came to Matt Lampton's ears as he sat at his work-bench in the gunsmith's shop. Noises he had been hearing over and over for close on to ten years now. A horse stamping in one of the stalls down in Joe Dill's livery stable; footsteps on the plank walks that lined either side of the street, and spurs jingling; voices and an hombre laughing like he'd heard something that sure tickled him.

"Funny how a feller gets to likin' a town and sort of feels it belongs to him," Matt Lampton muttered softly, talking to himself as a man will when he's used to working alone most of the time. "Ain't a place I'd rather be than right here in Cactus Bend."

The wick of the oil lamp on the work-bench sputtered as the gunsmith lapsed into silence and placed a new trigger spring in the gun on which he was working. Lampton was a big, square-faced man with thick dark hair that was turning gray around the edges.

He looked up as someone spoke from the open door of the shop.

"Seen the light shinin' through the window and figgered yuh might be here workin'. Thought I might come in and set awhile."

Lampton just nodded casual-like as he glanced at the man in the doorway, but the gunsmith's eyes were wary. He knew most folks in the little cowtown well and had found them right neighborly, but this Joe Russell was a comparative stranger. Lampton had seen him around town a lot during the last couple of weeks, but up to now Russell had seemed intent on minding his own business.

Russell stepped into the shop, a tall, thin man who walked with catlike steps. His boots were expensive but they had seen a lot of wear. His levis and shirt were neat and clean. But it was on the gun in his holster that Lampton's gaze centered. Sometimes you could tell a lot about a man by the gun he wore, at least Matt Lampton always figured so.

The cedar butt of that double action Colt .45 was worn slick, as if the gun had seen considerable use. The holster hung so that when Russell's right arm hung straight down the butt of the Colt was in easy reach of his fingers. Could be a gunslick, Lampton decided, but it wasn't always easy to be sure about a man.

"Reckon yuh get tired workin' on guns," Russell remarked as he seated himself on an upturned wooden box near the work bench. "Takin' 'em apart and puttin' them together again could get right monotonous."

"I never found it so." Lampton tried the trigger of the gun he was repairing and found the new spring worked fine. "Guns are a lot like people. There's somethin' different about every one of them."

THE gunsmith stopped working and swung around on his stool to face his visitor. He stared thoughtfully at the tiny

Matt Lampton

little holes in Russell's shirt just over the thin man's heart.

"You didn't come here just to pass the time away," Lampton said, as he picked up an old briar pipe and a tobacco pouch from the bench. "Figger yuh must have some reason for not wearin' yore badge while yuh're in town."

"What makes yuh think I wear a badge?" demanded Joe Russell, looking at Lampton as if he had misjudged the gunsmith first off. "Yuh just guessin'?"

"Observin'," Lampton said dryly. "Them pin-holes in yore shirt gave me the idea yuh might be a lawman. The sheriff we've got in Cactus Bend tends his job fairly well. There's been a couple of hombres knocked over the head and robbed lately, but this

town ain't what yuh'd really call wild."

"Not yet, it ain't," said Russell. "But it might be." His smile was right grim. "That's why I'm here. Yuh called it about the badge, Lampton. U. S. Deputy Marshal. I'm after—"

A boot scraped in the darkness beyond the open door. A knife gleamed in the light as it sped through the air. It made a strange little sound as it plunged into Russell's chest. He rose from the box clawing at the knife, his eyes rolling. His knees buckled and he went down—a thin, still figure on the wooden floor of the shop.

Matt Lampton reached for his gun, remembered he wasn't wearing his cartridge belt and holster as he worked. The guns on the work-bench were all empty. He leaned over and blew out the lamps. Darkness hid him as it did the dead man lying there at his feet.

The gunsmith stood listening. From outside came the sound of footsteps. Someone running away quietly but swiftly. Lampton was sure that Russell's killer was gone.

"Insultin', I call it," muttered Lampton. "Killin' a man with a knife in a gunsmith's shop!"

He went to the door and peered out into the street. Down at the saloon three riders from one of the spreads were swinging out of their saddles. The moon looked right pretty hanging there close to the peak of old Bald Top. Lampton sighed as he got to thinking what the deputy marshal had said about Cactus Bend becoming a wild town. The gunsmith didn't figure he would like that. Not any.

Lampton went back into the shop. He struck a match and held it to the wick of the lamp. The dead man looked lonely in the yellow light. Lampton knelt and made sure that Russell wasn't still breathing. The marshal had cashed in his chips, all right.

There were voices and footsteps out on the board walk. Sheriff Dan Clark loomed big in the doorway. A fast-moving fat man when he wanted to be. He looked at the body and then at Lampton. There were other men behind him.

"Was told you might need me, Matt," the sheriff said. "Feller passed the shop and figgered there was trouble. That looks like that feller Joe Russell lyin' there."

"It is him," Lampton said. "Somebody got him with a throwin' knife. He's dead."

Sheriff Clark stepped into the shop, with other men crowding in after him. Four of them, there were, men Matt Lampton knew well. They were all looking at the body and not paying him much mind. The sheriff turned the corpse over. There hadn't been much bleeding. Joe Russell still looked surprised and hurt.

"Yuh see who done it, Matt?" Clark asked as he stood up.

"No." Lampton shook his head. "Someone just outside the open door. I wasn't even wearin' a gun. I blew out the light to keep him from gettin' me, too. Russell aimed to tell me somethin' when he was killed."

"You boys take the body down to the undertaker," the sheriff ordered. "Tell Ben Dale I'll be along to talk to him shortly."

The four men picked up the corpse and moved out of the shop. They were talking quiet-like among themselves as men will when something is puzzling them. The sheriff sighed and seated himself on a box. He thought best, sitting down.

Matt Lampton walked over and took down the gun-belt hanging on a peg in the wall. He buckled the belt around his waist so that the holster hung down against his right thigh. He wasn't rightly what could be called a fighting man but he'd never been one to shirk trouble. The weight of the .45 in the holster was comforting.

"I ain't goin' to insult yuh by sayin' you could have killed the marshal with the knife, Matt," the sheriff remarked. "Still there's some folks that might think so."

"No cause for me doin' it." Lampton frowned. "Russell was a stranger to me. I never said more than 'Howdy' to him until he came here tonight. But he must have had a reason for comin' to see me. Yuh figger what it could be, Dan?"

"Mebbe he aimed to have his gun repaired," said the sheriff. "Might not have been workin' just right. What did Russell tell yuh?"

LAMPTON told how he suspected Russell was a lawman, because of the pin-holes in the dead man's shirt. It was characteristic of the gunsmith to keep working as he talked. He was putting the gun with the new trigger spring back together, and staying busy as a man will who likes his job.

"So I told him about there bein' a couple of hombres knocked over the head and robbed lately, but said the town wasn't what yuh'd call really wild," said Lampton. "Russell said, 'Not yet, it ain't—but it will be. That's why I'm here. I'm after—' Before he could finish somebody got him with the knife."

Both men stopped talking as they heard heavy footsteps on the plank walk outside the shop. A moment later a big man appeared in the doorway. He was Jed March, who had bought the Eagle Saloon just a few weeks back. March looked a heap more like a rancher in the way he dressed and acted than he did a saloon-keeper. The holster on his right hip was empty.

"My gun ready, Matt?" he asked. "I feel right unprotected without it. Heard about that marshal being killed, and what with a couple of rich cattlemen like John Wadely

and Denver Harvey being knocked out and robbed here in town I aim to go armed."

"Just finished workin' on the gun, March," Lampton said, handing the saloon owner the Colt with the new trigger spring. "Reckon yuh'll find it's all right now."

"Good." March took the gun, loaded it, and thrust it into his holster. "What do I owe yuh, Matt?"

"Reckon a dollar will cover it."

Lampton got to thinking that he never had liked Jed March much. Besides, there had been too many hardcases hanging around the saloon since the new owner had taken over the Eagle.

"Be a little careful in usin' that gun till yuh get it worked in," he advised. "That trigger spring might be a mite fast."

"I'll watch it."

March handed the gunsmith a silver dollar. Then the saloon owner glanced at the sheriff.

"Why, I didn't see yuh sittin' there, Sheriff," he said in a surprised tone. "Thought it was a tub of lard."

Jed March laughed at his own joke as he left the gunsmith's shop. Sheriff Clark was scowling. Most times the lawman didn't mind jokes about his being fat, but it was evident he didn't care for March making fun of him.

"I'm shore glad yuh recognized the hombre who threw that knife, Matt," the sheriff said, his eyes fixed on the shadows beyond the open door of the shop. "I'll place him under arrest as soon as I get around to it."

Matt Lampton looked at the sheriff in amazement. The gunsmith hadn't said a thing about recognizing the man who had thrown the knife and killed Russell. But Clark usually knew what he was doing, so Lampton didn't deny the sheriff's statement.

The gunsmith looked closely at the silver dollar that March had given him. He grunted, and looked again. The initials "D. H." had been cut into the coin in tiny letters.

"Why this is Denver Harvey's pocket piece," Lampton said. "He always carried this silver dollar and never spent it. Yuh know—the feller that hit Harvey and Wadely shore struck hard. Both them men died from the blows."

"I know," said the sheriff, as he got to his feet. "I got something to tend to now. I'll see yuh later, Matt."

Sheriff Clark left the shop. The street grew quiet. Lampton got to hearing the same sounds he had been hearing every other night—the noises that were part of the little cowtown.

Before long the gunsmith decided that he had worked enough for one evening. Besides, he had had a busy day and he was tired. He closed the window, blew out the lamp, and picked up his hat. He hesitated, then went back and got something off the work-bench, placed it inside his hat, then put the Stetson on again.

He stepped outside and turned to fasten the padlock on the door. At that instant a figure lunged at him out of the shadows. Lampton caught a glimpse of a hand holding a Colt by the barrel as the butt was brought down on the gunsmith's head.

The blow stunned Lampton even though his head was protected by his hat and what he had placed inside it. He heard a gun roar and the man who had attacked him staggered and cursed.

LAMPTON moved away, snatching out his own gun as he did. Clark came running down the street, and the sheriff was moving fast for a fat man. Lampton's attacker dropped to the plank walk and lay there moaning.

"Didn't figger he'd try to get yuh so fast," said the sheriff. "Thought I might bring him out into the open by makin' out yuh knew who killed the marshal. And I was right."

He knelt beside the wounded man. Jed March's face was revealed in the light of a match in the sheriff's hand. The saloon owner had been shot in the chest.

"Always did say it was dangerous to hit a man over the head with the butt of a gun," Lampton said dryly. "The gun might go off and wound the feller that's holdin' it—just like March's gun just did. I told him that trigger worked mighty easy."

"I'm cashin' in," moaned March. "Planned to gradually take Cactus Bend over, make it a place where outlaws could hide out. The marshal knew—had to kill him." He shuddered and died.

"I started suspectin' March when he said he'd heard about the marshal being killed," Lampton remarked. "Didn't anybody but the killer know Russell was a marshal till I got the lawman to admit it to me."

"I noticed that," the sheriff said dryly.

"When yuh said I knew the killer I figgered I'd better play along with yuh, sheriff." Matt Lampton frowned as he stared down at the dead man. "Soon as he gave me his gun to repair I knew I didn't like him. He didn't even keep the gun clean." The gunsmith removed his hat and took out the rolled-up leather apron he had placed inside to protect his head. "Besides, he gave me a headache."

The Masked Rider gallops into action when disaster and rebellion stalk the town of Mazzard in OKLAHOMA GUN SONG, *Next Issue!*

Bill didn't hesitate a fraction. He set the brake, slammed the carbine to his shoulder

MAIL FOR ASPEN

By L. P. HOLMES

Mail Carrier Bill Wilkin Had a Bit of Knowledge About Everybody's Business, But He Showed His Calibre by Minding His Own!

THERE WAS a pallid morning sun creeping into the cold sky above the Horse Shoe Hills, but the thermometer outside the hotel door said zero. Grizzled old Bill Wilkin, the mail carrier, squinted at the mercury column, hunched his whiskered jaw deeper into the upturned collar of his sheepskin coat and headed for Colburn's store, where the night stage from Bastion always left the mail sack.

Colburn had just emptied the sack along his counter and was sorting. The pot-bellied stove in the middle of the store was creaking with heat and Bill Wilkin backed up to it, his hands spread.

"A morning like this and I could almost wish there was nary a lick of mail for Aspen, Henry," he grumbled. "Then I could stay with this stove all day."

Henry Colburn chuckled.

"Can't say I blame yuh, Bill. But no such luck. There's quite a shag of mail for Aspen and the folks along the route. Here's that letter for Missis Greer that she's been lookin'

for so long. If it's got the right kind of news in it, the comin' winter won't be so weary for her."

Spurs jingled in the doorway and Chris Leonard came in. With him was Bob Clute, his foreman. Both wore sheepskin coats and Angora chaps, cold weather gear for riding men. Leonard's broad, beak-nosed face was raw red from riding against the cold. He jerked a brusk nod nod to Bill Wilkin and turned to Colburn.

"Anythin' for me, Henry?"

Colburn tossed a thick catalogue aside.

"Latest mail-order bible for yore cook, Chris. Nothin' else."

Bob Clute laughed roughly.

"Cookie will be happy for the next three months. He's a fiend for those darn things."

Chris Leonard leaned against the counter, began fingering over the stack of Aspen mail. Bill Wilkin left the stove, shouldered in front of him.

"Sorry, Chris," he said. "But if it's not yores it's none of yore business." He lifted a battered leather mail pouch from a hook and began packing the Aspen mail into it.

Leonard swore softly.

"Yuh don't have to be so danged officious about it, Wilkin. What harm was I doin'?"

"The mail folks get is their private business, Chris. Nobody handles it in the meantime but them hired to. Uncle Sam is guardian of it from the time it's sent until it's received."

"The littler the job the bigger the strut," sneered Bob Clute.

Bill Wilkin threw a squinty glance at Leonard's foreman.

"And the bigger the mouth the heavier the wind," he retorted curtly.

Bob Clute took a step away from the stove.

"Why yuh simple old fool—!"

"Shut up, Bob!" rapped Chris Leonard. "Yuh asked for that one. Let's go get some breakfast."

They went out, spur chains scuffing. Henry Colburn turned to Bill.

"Why can't those hombres move around without tramplin' on the toes of other folks?"

Bill Wilkin jerked tight the buckles on his mail pouch.

"It's the breed, Henry. Walk all over the other fellow, just so yuh get ahead of him. That's Chris Leonard's idea of gettin' along in the world. Bob Clute, he's just a roughneck rider, who's kept clear of a sheriff's posse, or a noose or hot lead more by luck than anythin' else. He throws a tough walk and a tough talk, but somehow I doubt the sand in his craw is as deep as he'd like to have yuh believe.

"Well, I ain't admirin' the prospect of a thirty mile drive in this kind of weather, but as long as it's got to be done I might as well get about it. I'll probably hit some snow around the summit."

Swinging his mail pouch over his shoulder, Bill Wilkin headed for the livery barn, where he kept his buckboard and team. The bite in the air had the team full of ginger. Hump Pfluger, the roustabout, threw an extra buffalo robe on the buckboard seat.

"Yuh'll be needin' that crossin' the summit, Bill."

FOR a couple of miles Wilkin let the team run. Then, as they settled down to a swinging jog, he broke open the mail pouch on the seat beside him and began sorting everything into proper sequence.

The first stop was at the widow Greer's place. He saw her watching for him, a black shawl pulled over her head, framing her patient, lined face.

"Somethin' yuh been waitin' for, Sarah," he said, handing her the letter.

Watching, he saw the tide of relief sweep over her face.

"It's from Danny," she cried the moment she saw the writing. She tore it open, read swiftly and her eyes clouded with joy. "He's coming home, Bill! My boy's coming home! He's tired of chasing a restless saddle and he's coming home to settle down and take over the running of the place."

She looked almost young again, almost pretty. Bill Wilkin cleared his throat.

"That's mighty fine, Sarah. That's mighty fine."

She ran into the house, the precious letter pressed against her heart. Wilkin kicked off the brake and rolled on. Somehow there seemed to be less bite in the air.

For fifteen years Bill Wilkin had been carrying the mail between Steele City and Aspen. Long, lonely, weary miles, through scorching summer heat and frigid winter cold, through rain and snow, through all the seasons of the marching years. So much of it was weary monotony, yet every now and then there were highlights. Like this one. Like that letter he'd just given Sarah Greer. And those moments paid off for all the monotonous ones.

There were other compensations. It was like reading a book. The people along the route—you got to know their lives, their troubles, their sorrows, their victories against life and their happiness. You learned how people loved and hated, and why. You knew when people died and when new babies came along. You had your finger on the pulse of plain human existence. There was a certain, full satisfaction in that alone.

The road led gradually upward toward the distant summit of the Horse Shoes and when he crossed Lone Pine ridge, eight miles beyond the Greer place, Wilkin could see the Lazy H mailbox, set on its cairn of rocks.

A ground-reined saddle pony stood there and also a slim figure in divided skirt of

corduroy and a sheepskin jacket buttoned to the eyes.

"Morning, Norma," said Wilkin as he pulled in beside her. "Hope I didn't keep yuh waitin' long in this weather."

She smiled with her clear, steady eyes. Her cheeks were like roses from the cold.

"I won't mind the wait a bit providing you have something for me, Bill."

"Well, there's that Santa Fe newspaper yore maw likes so well, there's a Stockman's Journal for yore dad and a whole flock of magazines for you. Oh, oh—nearly gave yuh Jim Tenny's Stockman's Journal, too. Maybe I should have let it go with the rest. Then Jim would have had a good excuse to ride over and see yuh."

Her head tilted. "And Jim Tenny wouldn't have been welcome," she said crisply. "I thought I told you that the last time you made the same remark. Please understand, Bill Wilkin, once and for all, that I haven't the slightest interest in what Jim Tenny does or does not do, and never will. I'll be obliged if you never mention his name to me again!"

Bill Wilkin got out his stubby pipe, packed it with cold-stiffened fingers.

"All right," he said gruffly. "I'm goin' to have a final say and then shut up for good. When I started runnin' mail out this way you were just a chubby little twig half as big as a minute. Yuh used to ride out here to meet me with yore dad, ridin' across the saddle in front of him, hangin' on with both little fists.

"Up road five miles was Jim Tenny, just a leggy splinter of a kid a couple of years older than you. I've watched the pair of yuh grow up, havin' all manner of good times together. How many times have I hauled yuh both down to Steele City with me, fed yuh licorice whips and gum drops, put yuh up for the night with Mother Dolan and then hauled yuh back home again next morning?

"Well, what I'm drivin' at is, I figger I got some claim on the pair of yuh. I figger I've half raised yuh. And I figger I'm entitled to know why you and Jim ain't friends any more. That ain't the way I planned it, and I don't like it, none at all."

"Everything you say is true, Bill," Norma admitted, "except that you have a right to know—well—my private affairs. And I don't wish to discuss them."

"Bosh!" snorted Bill. "Goin' proud and haughty on old Bill! Yuh ought to be whaled, good. I know more than yuh think I do. I know that little cat of a 'breed girl over on Boulder Crick never liked yuh because she was jealous of yuh—you bein' who yuh are and her bein' who she is. So she made a lot of cat talk, just to hurt yuh and bust up you and Jim.

"Was I you, I'd listen to a straight-talkin' man like Jim Tenny for a change and not to a lot of gabble from a 'breed girl, and cold-figgered hints from such as Chris Leonard. Was I yore dad I'd sure shake some sense into that pretty head of yores. Giddap!"

ALL along the next five miles of road up to where the Broken T trail cut in, old Bill kept growling and muttering to himself. In his mind's eye he larruped Norma Hillgaard until she was too sore to sit a saddle.

"Durned silly little minx. Serve her good and right if Jim Tenny never does speak to her again!"

Jim Tenny was waiting beside the road, tall and lean and young, with a thin, grave face.

"That all, Bill?" he asked, as he took his Stockman's Journal.

"That's all, Jim. Somethin' yuh're kind of expectin'?"

"Somethin' I got to have," nodded Jim soberly. "A letter from the bank in Bastion. Keep an eye open for it, Bill—it will have a pretty sizable check in it."

"Borrowin' money, kid?"

"A legitimate loan, Bill. Yuh see, it's like this. That old Sharpe range I been runnin' on, well, I been waitin' for the Sharpe estate to get settled so I could buy that chunk of grass. Meantime I got an option on it. That option runs out a week from tomorrow. I got a right to renewal, providin' I have the ready money.

"I wrote the bank in Bastion for the loan. They promised it to me and it should be along. I'm just a little anxious because I can't afford to lose that range. The rest I got would be no good without it. But somehow, Chris Leonard got wise and he's let it be known he'll grab that option if I fault on it.

"Seems like," Jim ended bitterly, "Leonard is always ready to grab anything and everything anybody else faults on. Maybe it's good business, but I don't like his way."

All the way across the summit and down into Aspen, Bill Wilkin had something to think about. He had so much to think about he didn't greatly mind the mild blizzard he had to face going over the top. He just pulled his buffalo robes around him and squinted through the freezing drift, his thoughts elsewhere.

Now he knew what, back at Steele City, in Henry Colburn's store, Chris Leonard had been looking for when he started pawing through the Aspen mail. Leave it up to Chris Leonard to figure out Jim Tenny's difficulty and set about some way to block that option.

Of course, interfering with Uncle Sam's mail was plenty risky business. A man could go over the road for a plenty long time on a deal of that sort. Yet it was plain that Leonard was wondering about that loan Jim

Tenny was expecting from the Bastion bank. And when such as Chris Leonard started wondering and sticking his big beaked nose into things, you never knew how far he'd go to satisfy his greed.

That, come to think of it, was always the big weakness of men like Chris Leonard. They kept getting away with little things, bluffing out some local authorities. But sooner or later they always run up against something they can't bluff or lie through.

Bill lay over the night at Aspen then headed back for Steele City in the morning, the outgoing mail safely stowed in the pouch. It snowed all the way up and across the summit, then cleared to a lowering, gray day, chill and bitter.

It was late afternoon when Bill pulled in at Steele City. He left the team with Hump Pfluger at the livery barn, carried his mail pouch over to the store and gave it to Henry Colburn.

"Tough trip, Bill?" asked Colburn.

Bill backed up to the stove. "Not too bad. That letter for Missis Greer was good news. Her boy, Danny, is comin' home to run the place for her."

"That's swell," said Colburn. "Sometimes you must feel like Santy Claus, Bill."

"Sometimes," Bill grunted. "Any news?"

Colburn shrugged. "Odd Fellows are having a whist party tonight in their hall. So the Hillgaards are in town. Jim Tenny was in a little while ago. Jim seems to have somethin' on his mind."

"Could be," admitted Wilkin.

IN THE pale, frigid dusk, Wilkin went to his little room at the rear of the hotel and cleaned up for supper.

When he went into the dining room he saw the Hillgaard family at one of the big tables. With them sat Chris Leonard. Norma, very pretty under the glow of the hanging lamps, was laughing merrily at some remark Chris Leonard had just made. At the other end of the room, at a small table, Jim Tenny sat alone, grave and thoughtful-looking.

Bill Wilkin stopped by the Hillgaard table to speak to Nels Hillgaard and his wife, an older replica of Norma, with her thick, flaxen hair and glowing cheeks. Nels Hillgaard and his wife were friendly. Norma spoke, but there was a vague coolness in her manner. Chris Leonard shrugged a brief nod then turned all his attention to Norma again.

"How are things in Aspen, Bill?" asked Nels Hillgaard.

"Colder than here, Nels. Snow on the summit, both ways."

"All signs point to a long, cold winter," said Hillgaard. "A cowman is going to need every spear of grass he's got to get by."

"That's right," Bill agreed. "See you folks at the whist party."

Bill went along and sat down across the table from Jim Tenny.

"No use worryin', kid," he murmured. "That letter will be along in time."

"I suppose," said Jim Tenny moodily. "Sometimes I don't give a hoot whether it does or not."

"Get yore chin off yore plate," growled Bill. "I wouldn't let her see she was botherin' me. She's either just puttin' on a show, or she ain't. If she means it, then she ain't worth thinkin' about. If it's just a show, then she'll come around in time. Yuh're takin' in the card wrastle, of course."

"For a while I thought I might. Now I figger to head for home, soon as I get through eatin'."

Bill snorted. "Yuh go sneakin' off to feel sorry for yoreself and I don't bring yuh any letters of any sort. You and me are goin' to that whist party."

The Hillgaards finished eating and headed for the parlor, Chris Leonard with them. Nels Hillgaard turned off into the hotel bar to get a cigar. Bill Wilkin and Jim Tenny finished soon after and went into the bar. It was well crowded, ranchers from all about having come to town for an evening of sociability over the whist tables.

Nels Hillgaard, his cigar going, was talking to Ben Duroc and Clay Hadley. Drinking was very light, except at the inner end of the bar, where Bob Clute and Stinger Dell stood. They had a whiskey bottle in front of them and their glasses were full. They weren't saying much, but there was a sullen atmosphere about them. The cigar case was right beside them and Bill Wilkin headed for it.

"Nels' cigar smells good, kid," he said to Tenny. "Let's have one."

Bob Clute seemed to guess their intentions for he deliberately leaned an elbow on the top of the cigar case so it could not be lifted. Stinger Dell laughed thickly.

"An old fool and a young one. That's right, Bob—don't let 'em have any. Cigar smoke would make 'em sick."

"I'm buyin', Bill," Jim Tenny said quietly. He moved forward. "All right, Clute. Move over!"

Bob Clute squared around a little more.

"Move me," he challenged, leering.

"Yuh're feelin' yore liquor and not makin' sense," said Jim Tenny. "No profit in startin' trouble."

"I can't see a lick of trouble comin' from you," jeered Clute. "Peaceful, that's you—even when the boss steals yore girl."

Age had slowed Bill Wilkin down, the same as it does all men. And besides, Jim Tenny exploded with a suddenness no man could calculate. He hit Bob Clute twice, a hooking left which tipped Clute's head back and then a rapier right which exploded on Clute's jaw. Clute grunted, sagged and

went down limply.

Stinger Dell cursed, dropped the glass he was holding and clawed for his gun. Jim Tenny drove into him, low, slamming Dell back against the bar. He smashed Dell in the body with both hands, jerked him off balance, spun him half around and then almost dislocated his neck with a thundering right under the ear. Dell joined Bob Clute on the floor.

Jim Tenny leaned over, pulled the gun from Dell's twitching fingers, straightened up and slid it across the bar toward Pete Dolan, who was tending bar. Jim Tenny's face was white, his eyes blazing.

"Sorry, Pete, to start a ruckus. But—"

"Forget it, Jim," cut in Pete. "You didn't start anything. They did. I don't blame yuh. I heard what Clute said. Keep an eye on them until I get Leonard."

Pete hurried around to the door of the parlor and Bill Wilkin, listening, marked the sudden stop of the chatter and laughter going ón in there as Pete made his terse announcement.

"Something of yores in here, Chris, which needs throwin' out. Either you take care of that chore or I will."

CHRIS LEONARD came in and his broad face went dark as he saw his two riders just beginning to stir off the floor.

"What's the idea?" he growled. "Who—?"

"The idea," said Pete Dolan, "is that those two rum hounds started somethin' they couldn't finish. I don't want 'em in here. So, get 'em out!"

"Presently," Leonard snapped. "But first, who put them there? Who picked on a pair of boys just feelin' their liquor a little?" He saw Jim Tenny unconsciously massaging the knuckles of his right hand. "You! Kind of spreadin' yoreself, ain't yuh, Tenny? Maybe lookin' for more than yuh can han—"

Nels Hillgaard had moved forward, a cold light in his sea blue eyes.

"If Jim hadn't worked them over, I would have, Chris. They asked for it. Pete's got the right idea. You take 'em out or we throw 'em out!"

Bill Wilkin said, "Ha!" softly under his breath, and his eyes gleamed. Chris Leonard made as if to speak, swallowed the remark, grabbed his riders by their shoulders, pulled them to shambling feet and hustled them out into the night.

"I hope you're aiming to shuffle the cards with us this evening, Jim?" Hillgaard said mildly, after the three men had gone.

"I'll be there, Mr. Hillgaard," Jim promised.

It was a pleasant evening for Bill Wilkin. He enjoyed folks. He was pleased with Jim Tenny, who seemed to have thrown off his gloom and was talking and joshing, particularly with the women folks. Once Bill caught Norma Hillgaard watching Jim a little intently. Bill chuckled.

"That's the stuff, kid," he murmured to himself. "Let her know that yuh realize there are other women in the world besides herself and mebbe it'll teach her somethin'."

A switch of tables presently brought Jim Tenny and Norma Hillgaard facing each other as partners. At the next table Bill Wilkin observed closely, and was disappointed. They spoke, but were almost stiffly polite to each other.

"Darn fool kids!" mumbled Bill in disgust. Then he proceeded to trump his partner's ace and was briskly called down for it.

At ten-thirty Bill heard the Bastion stage come into town, hoofs and wheels rattling over the frozen earth. Henry Colburn gave his hand to an onlooker and went out to take over the mail.

There was another table switch and this time Chris Leonard was Norma Hillgaard's partner. Bill wasn't in as good a position to watch as he had been before, having to twist his head some. But a couple of looks showed that Norma wasn't reacting to Leonard's line of talk quite so eagerly as she had at the dinner table. Which was some satisfaction.

"Mebbe her pa gave her some talkin' to," Bill mused. "I shore hope so."

Henry Colburn came back looking pretty serious. He caught Bill's eye and jerked his head. Bill found somebody to turn his hand over to and followed Colburn out into the hall.

"Come downstairs, Bill. Want to show yuh somethin'."

They went down and out into the street. A couple of snow flakes hit Bill in the face. "Beginnin' to spit, huh," he mumbled. "Tomorrow will be a mean drive."

At the back of the store where a single small lamp threw a small circle of radiance, Steve Capell, the stage driver, was standing. The stout canvas of it had been slit nearly the entire length of the sack.

"What's the matter?" demanded Bill of Colburn. "Yuh lose yore key to the lock?"

"It was like this, Bill," Colburn explained. "When I heard the stage roll in I came down. Steve here, had a couple of passengers for the hotel. He helped lug their bags over. I saw him against the light of the hotel door, so I went around to the stage boot for the mail sack.

"I was just at the off rear wheel when I heard the zip of a knife that slashed this bag. One more step and whoever it was usin' that knife, heard me. I heard him cuss, then he dodged around the stage and cut out across the street at a run. Whoever it was, he was wearin' spurs. I heard 'em jingle. So then I brought the sack in and Steve came over and that's that."

"He didn't have time to get anything out

of the sack, then," said Bill.

"No, he couldn't have. But he aimed to try."

"Open her up," said Bill. "I want to take a look."

Colburn opened it and Bill ran through the first class mail. He found what he was looking for, a big bank envelope, addressed to Jim Tenny.

"I'll deliver this to Jim right now," Bill said. "He's been lookin' for it. Yuh better use that mail bag for a pillow tonight, Henry."

Bill put the letter inside his shirt and went out. He was pretty sure Chris Leonard couldn't have slit the bag because he was in the hall all the time.

A GUST of freezing wind buffeted Bill as he left the store and there was thickening snow in the air. Across the street a horse lit out, running, leaving town. A lot of people were coming down the stairs from the Odd Fellows hall. One of them was Nels Hillgaard.

"What's the idea?" Bill demanded. "The evenin's still a pup."

"The word came in it was beginning to snow," Hillgaard said. "Folks going home tonight want to get started before the storm gets too bad. If I can talk the Missis into it, I'll go myself. Stock to look out for."

"Where's Jim Tenny?" Bill asked.

"Jim was one of the first to pull out. He left about ten minutes ago. Said he had some calves in an open corral."

"Dang it!" mumbled Bill. Then he said to himself, "Anyhow, I got the kid's letter and nobody will get it off me."

There were six inches of snow on the ground the next morning, but the sky was clearing. It was plenty cold. Bill Wilkin went over to the livery barn to tell Hump Pfluger to harness a different set of horses to the buckboard.

"That young team is the fastest when the road is clear, but they haven't learned yet not to fight the snow. They were all in a lather comin' over the summit yesterday. It'll be snow all the way today, so I'll take the bay team. Slower but surer."

Steve Capell was there, looking after his stage horses. He grinned.

"Don't envy yuh today, Bill. Now me, headin' down for Bastion, I'm droppin' into country where the snow don't reach and where, even at this time of year, the sun shines and has a little warmth in it."

Bill grunted. "When you get my age yuh'll toughen up and not mind a little cold. Henry get any more idea who slit that mail bag?"

Capell shook his head. "Not that I know of. Last night, before turnin' in, I went over to the Elite for a hot toddy. Chris Leonard was there and I asked him what he thought about it. He said he couldn't figger it. Then he asked me what you thought of it. I told him I didn't know, but that there was one letter yuh weren't goin' to take chances with. That yuh took it to bed with yuh. He thought that was an awful joke."

"He did, did he?" growled Bill. "Well, I don't give a hang what Chris Leonard thinks." He was about to add that he, Bill Wilkin, didn't think much of Steve Capell for gabbing around like a gossipy old woman. But he didn't, for he knew it wouldn't do any good. Steve was like that, garrulous and empty-headed as a jay bird. And always meaning well.

He went over to the store and got the Aspen mail.

"I been checkin' up as best I can," Henry Colburn said. "I don't think that hombre got a thing last night, Bill. I scared him away before he could. I still don't know what he figgered he'd find in that sack."

"Might have been a drunk," said Bill.

But that wasn't what Bill Wilkin was really thinking, and so carrying his mail pouch, he went around to his room on the way to the livery barn. When he came out he had a short carbine hidden in an apparently harmless extra blanket. And he was thinking, "When they get desperate enough to slit open a mail bag of Uncle Sam's, they might not balk at a little game of holdup. So, should they try it, they're due for one stem-windin' surprise."

The mail pouch between his feet, the carbine across his knees under blanket and buffalo robe, Bill Wilkin headed out for Aspen. Strangely enough, Bill figured to enjoy this day's run. For the country lay glisteningly white, clear up to the crest of the Horse Shoes and beyond.

Snow travel wasn't bad until it got real deep. There'd probably be some two foot or better drifts at the summit to crawl through, but this team was old and wise in the way of snow travel and knew how to get through.

He had another letter and some magazines for Sarah Greer and he marveled at the change in her. She looked twenty years younger. She even joshed him about his red nose. Bill chuckled.

"If it's half as red as yore cheeks, Sarah, it's bloomin' like a rose."

Riding along after that, he was figuring, "If they jump me, it won't be in this wide open country and it'll have to be somewhere between here and Jim Tenny's trail. There's only one place which will do. That'll be where the road cuts up the center of Dead Horse Gulch. Yes, sir—that will be the place."

Dead Horse Gulch lay between two and three miles past the Lazy H mail box. A lonely place and any action along the depths of it hidden from the surrounding country.

Yeah, a good place for a holdup.

When the Lazy H mail box and its cairn of rocks came in sight, there was no waiting horse and rider beside it. Bill thought "Norma's mad at me. I don't care. She needs her ears pulled, that young lady does."

Coming on toward the mail box, Bill lifted his head and took a squint way up toward Dead Horse. And what he saw made him straighten up from his habitual hunch-shoulder slouch. It was quite a ways to Dead Horse, but against the sheer white of the snow, dark objects were visible a long way off.

THE two objects Bill saw were moving, men on horseback, and they were just topping the east ridge to drop from sight into Dead Horse. Bill blinked his eyes and looked again, but they were gone now and the expanse of white was empty.

"I must have seen something," Bill mumbled. "I did see something. Two of 'em. And it ties in with my hunch."

He fingered the carbine across his knees, and his bearded jaw jutted.

"I ain't goin' to argue," he growled. "I'll start shootin', first jump. They can't stop the mail!"

Or could they? Two against one, and him old and stiff and bundled up with blankets. They might get him and get that letter of Jim Tenny's and then Jim would be done, same as him. He had a right to take a chance on himself, but not with Jim's future. But how else could he get that letter to Jim without packing it?

The team stopped of their own account and Bill found himself right next to the Lazy H mail box. Inspiration came to him. "I'll leave it here in the Lazy H box. I'll write a note on it, tellin' the Hillgaards to see that it gets to Jim, pronto. Even Norma ought to be sport enough to do that for Jim and me."

He carried a pencil stub in the pocket of his shirt and reached under his coat, fumbling for it. As he did so he glanced around and saw a mounted figure coming out along the Lazy H trail. Even at the distance he recognized Norma, so he left the pencil where it was and waited.

She hailed him cheerfully enough.

"Morning, Bill. Nothing stops you, does it, rain, cold, snow—not even ornery young women along the route. What are you staring at me so sober for?"

"I'm wonderin'," Bill growled. "Wonderin' if yuh got it in yuh to do the right thing at the right time. I figger yuh have, else yuh wouldn't be a Hillgaard. Listen close, honey. Here's your mail, and here's a letter for Jim Tenny. That letter is awful important to Jim. It's important enough for a couple of hombres to be layin in wait for me up in Dead Horse. They aim to hold me up and take it away from me—and from Jim. But I'm going to fool 'em.

"You take it. You start out like yuh're goin' home. Soon as yuh get past that first low ridge yuh turn and cut for Jim's layout, fast as yuh can. Don't cut back to the road until yuh hit Jim's trail. Most likely he'll be out where his trail runs into the main road, he's that anxious for that letter. Now I ain't funnin' you, Norma. I ain't tryin' to put over anything on yuh. I'm dead serious. Will yuh do it?"

The girl, startled, was staring at him with wide eyes.

"Why—why, yes, Bill. Of course I will. But I don't understand—I can't figure—Why would anyone be wanting to hold up the mail? Why would they want to stop this letter from reaching Jim?"

"I'll explain it all, some other time. Don't yuh let anybody get their hands on that letter but Jim. And say, seein' that first snow is always good weather for coyotes, Jim will probably have his Winchester along. You tell him to throw a shell into it and come arunnin' for Dead Horse. I'll be thereabouts somewhere and I may be needin' help.

"I'll take it easy goin' in from here, but you, soon as yuh get out of sight of the road, you make time. Thanks a heap, honey. Yuh're a sweet one, after all. With you to deliver it, that letter'll mean twice as much to Jim. Now—skedaddle!"

Norma tucked the Lazy H mail into her saddle bags, but Bill noticed with satisfaction that she slipped Jim Tenny's letter down inside the throat of her buttoned-up coat. Then, a queer smile on her lips, she swung away and jogged off.

Bill Wilkin didn't hurry his team any on the approach to Dead Horse. There was a slight but steady grade and the team had already run out their first edge, so they were content to plug along at a swinging walk. Bill looked around once or twice and the second time saw that Norman Hillgaard was out of sight. He nodded with satisfaction.

"Got to get up early to out-fox old Bill," he mumbled pridefully.

Half a mile from Dead Horse he slid the carbine into the clear and pumped a shell into it, then tucked it down into a fold of the buffalo robe where he could swing it into instant action. Coming closer to the entrance of Dead Horse, he couldn't see a thing. Which was to be expected, for the road through Dead Horse took a couple of pretty sharp twists. When they jumped him it would be just as he rounded one of those twists.

Of course, he didn't need to make a shooting play now. He could just put his hands up and let them go through the mail. They wouldn't find what they were looking for.

But that thought was put aside quickly.

Fifteen years Bill Wilkin had been running the Aspen mail and nobody had ever stuck his nose into the mail pouch. By gummies, nobody ever would, long as he had a spark of life in him! Besides, if they failed to find Jim Tenny's letter, they might put two and two together and by a fast run, head off Norma Hillgaard, or even pull a surprise jump on Jim himself.

No sir. Right here in Dead Horse they'd have to shoot to get their hands on the mail.

RIDGES on either side of Dead Horse lifted in front of him. Bill's old eyes under their shaggy brows, were keened for the first movement or sight of anything irregular. A moment later the buckboard was into the gulch, rolling along between the slopes of white. Bill was hunched forward a little, apparently oblivious to his surroundings. But one hand was locked around the breech of that carbine.

The buckboard swung around the first twist of the road and nothing showed. Bill sat up a little straighter. They'd be right around the next turn, if they were there at all. And with that conviction, Bill brought his carbine half to his shoulder, a foot on the brake, ready to set the buckboard up short.

The buckboard whisked about the next turn—and there they were. Two riders, hunched against the cold, faces masked to the eyes with bandanna handkerchiefs, hats pulled low. Bill didn't hesitate a fraction. He set the brake, slammed the carbine to his shoulder and slashed a shot, all in one concerted move.

The nearest rider let out a howl of pain and surprise and went out of his saddle, a shoulder crooked and sagging. Bill's team, scared out of their hides by the snary of the carbine, hit their collars with a crash, slewing the buckboard around.

The second hold-up, stunned by the abruptness of the old mail-carrier's war talk, seemed to forget all about his guns. He just dug in spurs and set about getting out of Dead Horse Gulch the shortest way, which was straight up one side.

It would have been treacherously steep with dry earth under the plunging bronc's hoofs. With snow it was a skid way. The bronc got half way up, had its thrashing hoofs slide from under it, and horse and rider came upending back to the gulch bottom, a tangle of man and horse. Bill was out of the buckboard, carbine at shoulder and ready as the dazed rider got to his feet.

"Reach high!" grated Bill, and the hold-up reached.

Half and hour later Jim Tenny, his horse steaming from a wild run, came skidding down into the gulch. Right behind him was Norma Hillgaard. They found two very hang-dog and miserable riders hunkered down on sullen heels. Sitting at ease in his buckboard, warm in his blanket and buffalo robe, Bill Wilkin was watching his captives, carbine ready for action.

The two riders were Bob Clute and Stinger Dell. Clute had the damaged shoulder.

"They tried, but they didn't get far." Bill Wilkin grinned. "That letter have in it what yuh were hopin', Jim?"

"Exactly," said Jim. "Better yet was how it got to me."

Norma colored, a breathless smile on her lips.

"But why should these two, riders for Chris Leonard, try to get that letter, Bill?" she asked.

"Because Leonard set 'em to get it, while he, I bet, is very much in evidence around town, so's to have a good alibi. But it ain't worth much, that alibi. These would-be tough guys have been talkin' and have admitted that much. Also, Mister Clute cut heck out of the mail bag last night, but didn't get far. Jim, yuh think you two can herd the pair of them as far as Steele City and have Marshal Benning put 'em in his lockup?"

Jim grinned widely, happily.

"Norma and me, together, could push a mountain down. How about it, lovely?"

The way she looked at Jim made Bill all warm around his heart.

"I'll bet yore dad gave yuh a talkin' to, Norma," he said.

"He did," she admitted candidly. "But I'd already had my mind made up, about—well, this and that. It has always been made up, never really changed." She was looking at Jim Tenny as she spoke.

"Which, Jim, makes things pretty nigh a windfall," said Bill.

"Pretty nigh," Jim agreed. "Now, what you goin' to do?"

"Take the mail to Aspen, of course," said Bill.

And he did.

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Sark grabbed the gun and jumped backward

MANHUNTER'S ACE

By GUNNISON STEELE

A Prisoner Turns the Tables on a Sheriff, But—

THE heat was a violent, merciless thing. It beat down from the brassy sky and it boiled up from the brown earth. The wind blew in irregular gusts, stirring up whorls of powdery dust that gyrated and danced and whispered sibilantly; it ground into the eyes and skin of the two men stumbling across the desert toward the purple hills.

Tebe Sark cursed the heat and sand and wind, and he cursed Sheriff Luke Thor. Sark was a big man, with dark, hawklike features, while Sheriff Thor was a scrawny, gnarled little gent with a handlebar mustache. But Luke Thor had a gun, and he was tough; Tebe Sark was his prisoner, with his thick wrists manacled before him, headed back for Monument and a hangrope.

Sark licked dry lips, looking at the canteen slung from Luke Thorp's shoulder. That water had been his downfall, and his salvation. It had made him stop and surrender when otherwise he might have made it on to the hills ahead of the sheriff. He'd been without water for nearly two days, his horse having fallen and broken its leg on the side of a ravine —smashing his one canteen at the same time. That had put him afoot, but awhile later he'd downed the sheriff's mount with a lucky shot, and that had evened things up—except for water.

In the end water had been the deciding factor, as it always was in the desert.

Luke Thor hadn't turned back when his horse was killed. Folks called him the Desert Bloodhound, because his domain lay mostly in this vast desert country and because he always clung doggedly to a trail until he got his man. And he'd wanted especially to get Tebe Sark. Sark was wanted for half a dozen killings, the latest being the cold-blooded murder of a bank cashier back in Monument. So he'd followed Sark deep into the Red Desert, using his remaining can of water as a weapon to make Sark stop and surrender.

Sark said hoarsely, "I'd like a drink of that water."

Luke Thor shook his head.

"You had a drink not over an hour ago. Keep goin'. We'll reach Iron Springs by sundown."

"Cripes, what of it? You ain't the only one that knows this desert from top to bottom and sidewise. The Iron Springs hole has water in it five months of the year—the other seven it's bone dry. It's been dry now for three months."

"You been there lately?"

"No, I ain't, but I know. Over yonder to the west, now, is the Crazy Woman hole—"

"It's forty miles away."

"Yeah, but it's got water in it. That can you've got is still half full. It'd keep us alive till we got there. Craziest thing I ever saw, you headin' for Iron Springs when you know—"

"Shut up!" Thor snapped. "Talkin's too much trouble, and I don't like to listen to you. You bargained for a hang-noose when you stopped and whined for a drink in the first place."

"I got rights, even if I am a prisoner."

"Go on—go on!"

SARK lowered his head against the fierce heat and trudged on. His hatred for the runty manhunter was a bitter, consuming thing. When he was still just a kid Thor had jailed him for stealing a pony. True, the sheriff had intervened for him at the trial and been instrumental in getting him free for a fresh chance. But instead of kindling gratitude inside Tebe Sark, it had been the foundation of a hatred that had grown into a monstrous, savage thing over the years.

Two years ago, the desert sheriff had captured Sark again and brought him to trial. This time, Luke Thor hadn't begged clemency for him. He'd offered testimony that had brought Tebe Sark a lifetime prison sentence. . . .

The sun sank lower toward the dark hills, but that didn't lessen its fierce heat; it beat at them like a huge red fist. The wind had died, leaving a vast stillness. And four buzzards sailed in slow graceful sweeps high above the two men. The buzzards had been following them all day.

"I'm starvin'," Sark whined. "And seems like all the hide's wore off my feet. I got to rest and have a drink."

"All right," the sheriff conceded, and gestured toward a nest of red boulders nearby.

They went toward the boulders, their boots sinking deep into the powdery sand. They sat down in the shade and Thor unscrewed the top of the canteen.

"Drink sparin'," he said, and handed the canteen to Sark.

Sark drank noisily and greedily, drops of water spilling from his mouth and tricking down his bristly dark jowls. He lowered the canteen, sighing heavily, and screwed the cap back on.

"Why'd you do that?" the sheriff asked testily. "You think I'm not thirsty?" He took the canteen from Sark.

Sark sat facing the sheriff, less than five feet away. As he released the canteen, he let his manacled hands drop between his knees and scoop deep into the powdery sand. He had screwed the cap tightly on the canteen. The sheriff muttered impatiently, lowering his gaze to the canteen and thereby lessening his vigilance for an instant.

Sark's cupped hands jerked upward, flinging the double handful of sand straight into the sheriff's face and eyes. The lawman grunted and tried to fling his runty body aside. But Sark had followed the sand in a lunging drive that carried him violently against Thor and smashed the manhunter backward.

The impact knocked the canteen from the sheriff's hands and several feet to one side. It struck a boulder, then thudded to the sand and remained there partially buried, the unscrewed cap sticking straight up.

The sand had momentarily blinded Luke Thor. As the killer smashed him backward, he grabbed for his gun. But Sark was on top of him like a hungry wolf. He raised his hands and brought the heavy manacles down solidly on the sheriff's head.

The sheriff stiffened, stunned but not unconscious.

Sark grabbed the gun and jumped backward. He watched, grinning evilly, as Sheriff Thor sat up dazedly, wiping the sand from his streaming eyes.

"Desert Bloodhound, huh?" he jeered. "Leapin' lizards, you're just like any other dumb lawman, fallin' for a trick like that!"

"For a minute there I forgot I was dealin' with a skunk instead of a man," the sheriff said bleakly. "I won't make the mistake again."

"You won't make *any* mistake again."

"What you aimin' to do?"

"I aim to collect a lot of back pay. I've hated you a long time, old man—ever since you jailed me that first time on a fake pony stealin' charge."

THOR had wiped most of the sand from his eyes. He said:

"It wasn't a fake charge. You stole the horse, and I knew it, but you was just a kid then and I thought mebby you'd go straight if you had the chance. But you was rotten clean through. You went from stealin' to robbin' and killin'.

You thought a man was a fool to work and be honest."

"I still think so! You've hounded me ever since I can remember—you drove me outside the law and put a price on my head. Then, finally, you hunted me down and helped swear me into the pen."

"It was my duty."

"And I reckon it was your duty, after I broke out a while back, to hunt me down like this and try to put a rope about my neck!"

"That's right. You killed a guard when you broke out. Besides that, you come back and robbed the Monument bank and killed Bob Carruth. Bob was my friend. You're a snake, Sark. You deserve to hang, and I'd like to be the one to put the rope about yore neck! I don't expect any mercy from you—now, go ahead and shoot!"

"Why, I don't aim to shoot you," Sark said softly. "That'd be too quick and easy. I want you to suffer and crawl. I won't get to see you do it, but I'll know about it."

"What you aimin' to do?"

"See that canteen over there in the sand? It's nearly half full of of water, plenty to take me to the Crazy Woman water hole. I'll fill up there and make it on into the hills, where I got friends. It's over forty miles to Crazy Woman. Think you could make it there, afoot, already thirsty like you are and without a drink?"

"So that's it," the sheriff murmured. "You aim to turn me loose in the desert, without water, to die."

"That's the idea." Tebe Sark grinned,

[*Turn page*]

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jiggling the gun-muzzle. "See them buzzards up there? They've been followin' us all day. Now they'll follow you, whichever way you go. They'll know you're gonna die.

"They'll watch you, and they'll get lower and lower, and when you start crawlin' they'll come down on the sand and waddle along beside you. They'll start peckin' at you, even before you die. They go for your eyes first, I hear."

"Sark," Luke Thor said gently, "I'm sorry I called you a snake. That's insultin' the snake. You're so low-down rotten mean there just ain't anything to call you."

Sark laughed. "You'd like to make me shoot you, wouldn't you? But I won't. I'll know just about the time the buzzards start peckin' at you, and I'll get a big kick out of it. Well, what're you waitin' on? Get up and go on whenever you get ready. Go any way you like—any direction you go, you'll find just what I told you!"

"All right, Sark, if that's the way you want it." The sheriff got slowly to his feet, turned his back on Tebe Sark and started walking across the desert.

Sark watched him go, his runty figure becoming smaller and smaller in the distance. Then the dancing red heat-devils closed in, and Luke Thor vanished suddenly.

Tebe Sark swore, feeling instead of the fierce triumph he'd expected a drab sense of bafflement and defeat.

Then he shrugged, thinking of the safety that lay ahead in the cool blue hills on the desert edge. He was still thirsty, and he went to the partially-buried canteen in the loose sand and picked it up.

HE STOOD very still a moment, the canteen in his hands, a blank look on his face. Then he cursed, loudly and shrilly, and shook the canteen, and the beginning of cold terror rose dark and gibbering inside him.

The canteen was empty!

Frantically, Sark scratched with his fingers in the sand where the canteen had been partly buried. Underneath the surface, the sand was cool and damp. Sark stared at the tiny, jagged hole in the bottom of the canteen; he looked at the granite boulder, remembering the metallic clank the canteen had made as it hit the boulder when he knocked it from Luke Thor's hands.

Tebe Sark stood very still, staring at the empty canteen in his hands. Then suddenly he looked upward, and he saw that the buzzards hadn't followed Luke Thor after all. They hovered above him, wheeling in lowering circles, like black spectres of doom. . . .

Sheriff Luke Thor came to the Iron Springs water hole just at sunset. It was dry now, its floor encrusted with powder-dry alkali crystals.

Luke Thor strode straight across the dry sink and paused at a barrel-shaped boulder a hundred feet beyond. He scooped with his hands in the loose sand beside the boulder and brought forth a small canteen. He uncapped it and drank deeply from its sparkling contents. Then he sighed, sat down with his back to the boulder and stared back across the desert.

"Tebe Sark was awful sure there wasn't any water here at Iron Springs," he murmured. "Reckon it's lucky I didn't tell him about my ace in the hole—this canteen I buried here last winter, when Iron Springs was full, and the other cans I got scattered about over this here desert. Ain't the first time they've come in handy. Lucky, too, that Tebe didn't see what I saw before he chased me out into the desert to die: that all the water had leaked out of the canteen there in the sand where he knocked it."

The desert sheriff looked thoughtfully at the tiny black specks he could see circling against the crimson sky far back there over the desert.

"Still and all, that's the way Tebe said he wanted it. Won't be the first time ol' desert's finished a job for me!"

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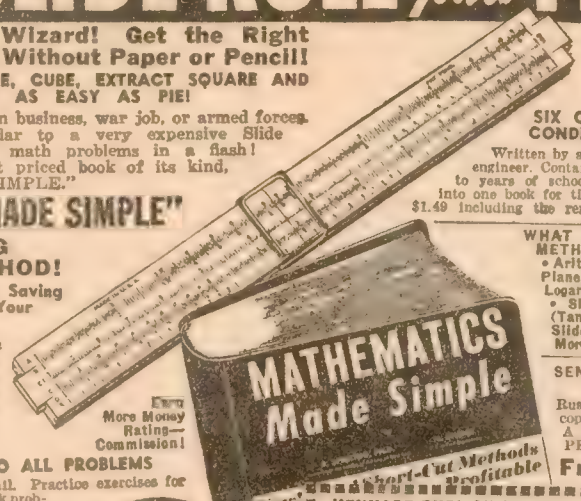

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TRAIL TALK

(Continued from page 9)

in love with the same girl, and soon it looked as though there would be a duel to the death between them. However, they reached an agreement, and both dropped the girl, both moving on to Bannack to start another crime wave.

Grandstand Play

Bannack was full of badmen, and much to his disgust Mr. Plummer did not attract any attention. No one seemed to be afraid of him, and this condition of affairs irked him. He must do something to let them know that he was really a badman, so just to prove his value to them he waited until there was a fair sized audience in the leading saloon, and with his partner, Jack Cleveland, present, he proceeded to revive with Cleveland the old argument over the girl they had left behind and when the argument got warm he ended it with his six-shooter killing Cleveland in a manner filled with gusto.

It was nice work with a pistol, but poor judgment. He had sought only prominence, but his act had brought him disagreeable notoriety, for soon he was chaperoned by a sheriff named Hank Crawford, before a judge and jury charged with murder. Therefore instead of proclaiming him a hero as he ex-

[*Turn page*]

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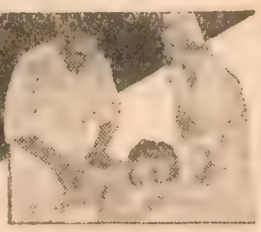

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pected, the citizens of Bannack were trying to have him hanged.

The jury found him not guilty, then Plummer vowed openly that he would kill the sheriff who arrested him. This time he would really impress upon the citizens that he was a badman. He continued for a week or more to tell everyone he came in contact with that he was gunning for the sheriff.

The Battle Is On!

As Sheriff Crawford and Plummer both did their drinking at the same bar, it was natural that they should meet and the battle was on, but while Plummer was engaging in much talk and setting the stage for a grandstand play the sheriff beat him to the draw, shot him in his gun-arm, breaking it, and rendering Plummer useless as a gunman for some time to come. Then just to show his disdain for the self-styled badman, the sheriff refused to pump more lead into the body of the outlaw and allowed him to live.

Plummer, however, was determined to be the big shot of Bannack, and so in a short time after the affray with the sheriff, Crawford resigned and went back east and Plummer took over the job as sheriff.

Law by Six-gun

Having become Sheriff, his first act was to appoint two men of his own caliber, Buck Stinson and Ned Ray, as his chief deputies. They were immediately assigned the task of bringing to an end the life of a former deputy named Dillingham, whose knowledge of past events was dangerous to the cause of the new Sheriff.

Dillingham was assassinated within the shadow of the courthouse at Virginia City, and soon after that Plummer rode over from Bannack, called upon the Sheriff of Virginia City, gave him the preference of resigning or meeting the same fate as Dillingham.

The Sheriff chose to resign, and Plummer immediately took over the position of Sheriff of Virginia City also. Then there ensued the organization of one of the greatest gangs of road agents the West has ever known.

The Plummer Band of Road Agents consisted of twenty-seven men, any and all of them measuring well up to the standard of badmen. For identification one with another, they adapted a certain cut of their mustaches, all wore cravats tied in a peculiar kind of sailor knot, and peculiarly enough for a gang of men who were guilty of practically every crime on the calendar, their adopted pass word was, "Innocent."

A Flourishing Business

The purpose of the organization was to prey upon the stage coach line and independent travel between Bannack and Virginia City, and these being two of the most flourishing mining towns in Montana, there was usually much wealth in cash and gold carried by individuals and firms over the forty mile route, and naturally the double office-holding sheriff was at the head of the organization.

The outfit was well organized, with every department fully manned. Two professional horse thieves had the duty of supplying the

gang with fresh mounts. There were seventeen in the "roadster department" who conducted the holdups, committed the necessary murders and collected the spoils.

The fourth and principal department was the station men, Plummer, Bill Bunton, Ned Ray and Buck Stinson, whose part in the affairs of the gang was to spot rich cargos and wealthy passengers that might be taking the road and sending the word on to the boys.

Loafing around the stage station one morning, Sheriff Plummer noticed that three men whom he had seen make a heavy winning in a gambling house the night before, were booking passage for Virginia City. He hurried back to his office and dispatched a "runner" with an appropriate message to the "roadsters" ahead.

Late that night when the stage reached Virginia City one of the three men called at the sheriff's office there to report the robbery. A Plummer deputy occupied the office.

"Well, what of it," snorted the deputy, glaring at the victim. "Lots of people get robbed, but none of 'em come around here to tell us about it."

"But this is different," answered the unlucky passenger, "because I know the names of the men who held us up, and I can give them to you if you want them."

The reply from the deputy was: "That's a lot of dangerous information for any stranger to be totin' around with him and I don't want you to unload any of it in here. Get out!"

The stranger did get out but that was not all. He was shot in the back upon leaving. He died because he knew too much for the health of the gang and the next day his "unidentified" corpse was buried in Boot Hill cemetery.

Personal Attention

On another occasion a man named Davenport and his wife, wealthy people who had lived in Bannack for some time, but had grown tired of the rough society and lawlessness of the place, decided to go back to the states.

They sold their effects, turned everything they had into cash and gold dust and drove happily away in their own conveyance. As this was a matter where a lady was involved, Mr. Plummer didn't want to trust the job to his road agents.

He gave the matter his personal attention. Galloping out of Bannack he overtook Mr. and Mrs. Davenport, and at the point of a six-shooting persuader suggested that they turn over their riches to him for safe keeping. The robbery accomplished, he galloped back into town where he boasted almost openly of his gallantry in returning to the lady her part of the money, claiming to be a high-class road agent who would not rob a lady.

At another time a merchant of Virginia City, Lloyd Magruder, who had accumulated a surplus of $50,000, started with his cash and four men to help guard it to go back East and buy more goods.

Four men, unknown to the Magruder party, but in reality members of the Plummer gang, just happened to be traveling in the same direction and a few days out on the trip the

[*Turn page*]

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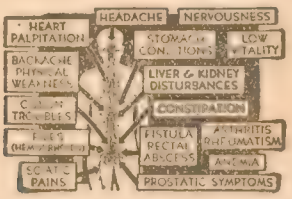

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four were murdered and the $50,000 added to the treasury of the sheriff's organization.

Thus it went on. Holdup followed holdup and murder followed murder. No one was safe. The miner who was successful enough to accumulate a few thousands, the merchant whose business was profitable, the saloon keeper whose patronage was productive, were all marked as victims by the lawless adventurers.

Of course such a state of lawlessness could not go on forever. There were enough law abiding citizens to stamp out the evil, and while they had grown suspicious of the sheriff and all of his deputies, they needed organization and confidence in their own strength. They needed something to stir them up to a pitch where they would wade in on the lawless gang and strangely enough it was the killing of a mere grouse that stirred up the final action.

While out hunting one day, not far from Virginia City, a reputable citizen shot a bird in flight. It was a good wing shot. The bird fell some distance away in the brush, and when the hunter went to retrieve his game he found the dead grouse lying upon the dead body of a man.

He reported the finding of the corpse and later in the day, the dead man was identified as a man named Tiebalt, who had evidently been killed for the $100,000 which he had with him, and his saddle mule.

For some unaccountable reason this stirred the good citizens of Virginia City, who had overlooked dozens and dozens of more revolting crimes. They began to organize a Vigilance Committee and swore that they would capture the murderer of Tiebalt. They found the mule that the dead man had ridden in the possession of George Ives. It was afterwards found that he was not the murderer, but he was strung up for the murder anyway.

Red Yeager's Confession

With one execution to their credit the Vigilance Committee a few days afterwards seized a fellow by the name of "Red" Yeager who had recently joined the Plummer gang as a "runner." Red proved a great find, for just before he was hung he "came clean" with a confession implicating the entire gang.

This confession merely confirmed the suspicions of the committee regarding the twin office-holding sheriff, and they were not slow to act, and hardly before Yeager's lifeless body had ceased its struggles in the hangman's noose a detachment of the Vigilantes was on its way to Bannack.

They reached their destination in the middle of the night and made immediate inquiry for Messrs. Plummer, Stinson and Ray. They were easily found. Plummer was at home undressing. Stinson was taking a night-cap in a saloon and Ray was asleep on a gambling table.

The evidence being all in, there was no reason for any delay, and living up to the code of speedy Frontier justice, Mr. Plummer and his two chief deputies and advisers were promptly hanged.

So ended the life and career of Henry Plummer, one of the most bloodthirsty outlaws Montana Territory ever knew, and so ends

[*Turn to page 78*]

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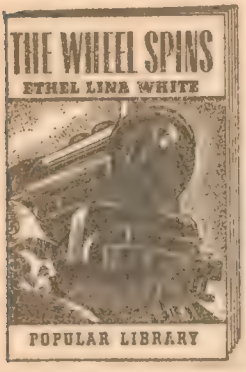

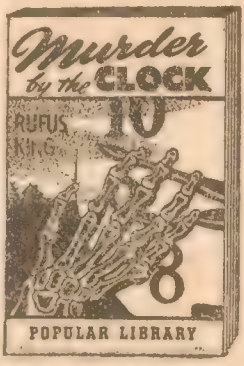

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another trail ride and Trail Talk, and after saying "glad you came along for the ride," I'll be saying *Adios.*

—FOGHORN CLANCY.

OUR NEXT ISSUE

THE town of Mazzard, on the fringe of the Ozarks, in Oklahoma Territory, was a trouble spot. Something sinister was brewing there, very quietly but very surely, and one day the pot would boil over and the hot pitch of hades would nip at the heels of everyone within reach.

Wayne Morgan knew it. Across plain and mesa and mountain the tall, blue-eyed Masked Rider could smell trouble when it was no bigger than the little blue flicker of a sulphur match. He had a nose for such things. He had proved it a hundred times, with that strange sixth sense of his that brought him loping in to side and aid some poor devil in distress.

Four men told the town of Mazzard what to do, but they couldn't make the town like it. It seethed with a ferment of rebellion and resentment that morning when Wayne Morgan shoved the batwings of the swanky Aces Up saloon and ran plumb into two of the rannies that rodded the place.

Morgan called for cards in the deadly game of Mazzard intrigue when he shot off John Terbin's boot heel. Sort of a blunt way of counting himself in, but effective. Terbin warned him he'd better fork leather and ride—fast—or else.

But Morgan had heard Terbin and Carl "Cactus" Moss arguing over their whiskey and he gathered that for some reason or other the sinister power behind these two gents was putting the squeeze on surrounding ranchers, driving them out. Oh, sure, by legal process. The Mazzard Development Company could do it by mortgage foreclosure. But sometimes a man who sees his life savings and all his effort and sacrifice vanish by way of the crooked mortgage route is as mad—and ten times as dangerous—as a rope-burned longhorn, and when he goes on the prod he leaves a trail of mud and blood.

So then Morgan—he hadn't shown himself yet as the Masked Rider—stayed in Mazzard, and the heck with Terbin's threats. And he took a job as clerk for Cactus Moss, who was the very smooth legal brains of the clique that ran the town. Imagine big, two-gunned, hard-shootin' Wayne Morgan as a law clerk!

But it was a kind of observation post that gave him a birdseye view of the situation, and he hadn't been roosting there twenty minutes when things began to happen. The Corporation had put the clamps on one Pete Lempkin, rancher, but Lempkin rose up on his hind legs and defied the foreclosure order—with a loaded shotgun—which isn't a spitball blower in any language.

Now why should the big shots be sweating

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RANGE RIDERS WESTERN

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about a little fellow like Pete Lempkin? Wayne Morgan figured it was time to become the Masked Rider for a spell and find out. So he hunted up Blue Hawk, his Yaqui Indian companion, and the two of them went to ask Lempkin:

"How come all this ruckus about a little two-bit spread, anyhow?"

But the tall, black-cloaked, black-masked Robin Hood of the range and his Yaqui comrade arrived just in time to take a hand in a piece of gun business started by a bunch of whooping, pony-riding, torch-carrying, painted savages. They set fire to the ranch-house, and, with the blazing building for a torch to see by, the Masked Rider and Blue Hawk plunged into a battle that will make your eyes pop when you read about it.

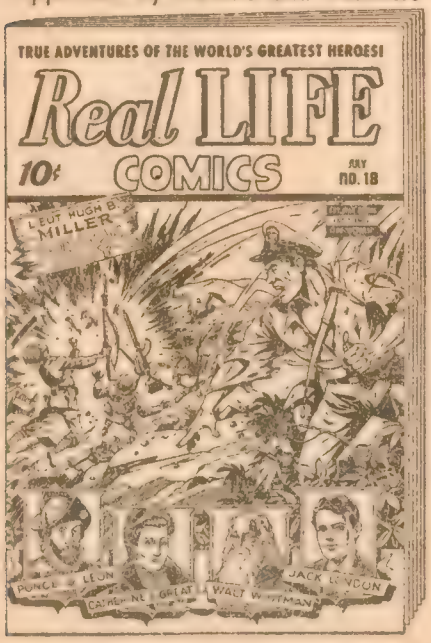
But you've just started. The Indians were Cherokees, but of the half dozen sent by the Masked Rider and Blue Hawk to join Pete Lempkin in death, one proved to be a white man in disguise! Who was he?

Back to Mazzard went the Masked Rider to find out, and Blue Hawk went along—only now they were Wayne Morgan and just a wandering Indian brave—in a town seething with the news of the Lempkin raid and all set to cut the ears off Indians on general principles.

The law, in the person of Marshal Cotter, laid harsh hands on the wandering Blue Hawk and pitched him into the local hoosegow. He had found out who the disguised white man had been, but now he was behind bars and how could he tell Wayne Morgan about it? And Morgan had learned that the Corporation—that was the St. Louis Mining Corporation—was picking up coal rights in the valley.

[*Turn page*]

Approved by Parents and Teachers



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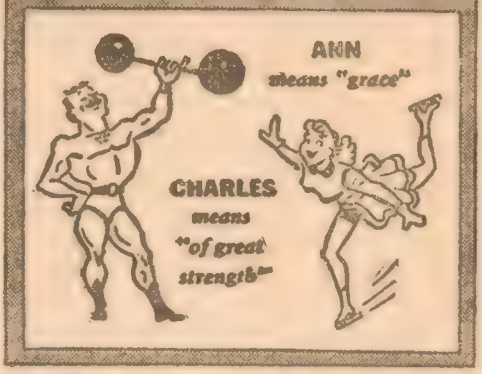

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But there was no coal under the Lempkin ranch, and the big question mark still hung and rattled in front of Morgan's eyes. What was this Terbin-Moss-et al crowd up to, anyhow? Whatever it was, there was a heap of friction building up between the corporation and the ranchers—building up to a heat that would touch off a lot of gunpowder directly.

Of course the Masked Rider sprang Blue Hawk out of the jailhouse—yeah, the Masked Rider, not Wayne Morgan. And the Masked Rider, sided by the loyal Indian, then proceeded to a piece of direct action that gave Terbin and a few others a glimpse at close range of the blue fumes of purgatory.

So Terbin set his sights for Wayne Morgan, figuring him to be the Masked Rider and their worst enemy, and—

But if you think we're going to tell you the rest of it, think again. OKLAHOMA GUN SONG, by Oscar J. Friend, is too good a novel to spoil for you by telling it all in advance. You'll find it in the next issue of MASKED RIDER WESTERN, coming up, and we'll say that this colorful Robin Hood of the sagebrush land, with his horse, Midnight, and his pal, Blue Hawk, rides a mighty salty trail in this grand novel of Frontier days.

Naturally, there will be a number of splendid short stories to round out the issue, as always. And another Trail Talk department by Foghorn Clancy. Plenty of good reading, hombres!

OUR LETTER BOX

WE WANT to hear from you whenever you feel disposed to "take pen in hand." Or pencil—or typewriter—or whatever. You may have praise to write—or maybe a few squawks to get off your chest. Send 'em along. That's how we keep the magazine up to a high standard. You tell us what you like and what you don't like—and we follow

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I have been a reader of MASKED RIDER WESTERN for four years. I like it better than any other western I have read. The Masked rider is so good with guns that I think he should stay out of jams—but as long as he comes out all safe and sound, I guess it's all right.—*Don Juan Hayes, Ponta, Texas.*

Thanks, feller. That's a point you make—about staying out of jams—but you know that any hombre who wades into the middle of things the way Wayne Morgan does is bound to find himself in a tight now and then. But, as you say, he comes out okay—and he shows his best stuff when they spill him horns down and he comes up proddy and charging. Huh?

And here is another suggestion:

I've been reading MASKED RIDER WESTERN for some time now, and think it is very good. I would like for you to publish it more often. I liked *Gunpowder Strip, Steel Rails to Peril,* and *The Devil's Range.—Horace McPherson, Elizabeth City, N. C.*

That's right nice of you, Horace, to say such fine things about the magazine.

But listen to this:

I have been a regular reader of MASKED RIDER WESTERN for longer than I ever stuck to any other western book, and in most ways I like it. The stories are really okay—very much so. But I'm asking why, on the cover of the mag, the Masked Rider wears a mask so small it would never hide his real identity. How come?—*Bill Rossmore, San Francisco.*

We appreciate your good letter, Bill, and we think your criticism has some merit. However, an artist must often take certain liberties in order to get a better picture. We're sure you will agree that there are action and character in these Masked Rider covers and that they reinforce in your mind the imaginary picture you have of the clean-cut, courageous Wayne Morgan. Right?

So now, *adios,* and please remember to address all letters and postcards to The Editor, MASKED RIDER WESTERN, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y. Thanks, everybody!

—THE EDITOR.

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- ★ **Your Choice of Emblems Engraved on your Billfold in 23k GOLD**
- ★ **Your Choice of Names Engraved on the Billfold in 23k GOLD**

YOU GET THIS! Smart looking, beautifully styled Leather Billfold with Pass Case to hold membership and credit cards. Patented snap feature locks securely so currency and valuables can't fall out.

YOUR NAME ENGRAVED HERE!

Smart Leather BILLFOLD

De Luxe VALUE

Your Favorite Emblem, Name *Engraved* IN GOLD! ➤ All At This One LOW PRICE

MONEY BACK GUARANTEE
More than 1,000,000 satisfied customers have bought merchandise from the ILLINOIS MERCHANDISE MART! **You Must Be Satisfied or Your Money Back**

Here, without a doubt is the greatest Billfold and Pass Case Bargain that you'll be likely to see for a good many years to come. Through a fortunate purchase we have a limited quantity of these smart leather Billfolds available at this low price If you have shopped around, you know that it is virtually impossible to get a good leather Billfold of this type beautifully engraved in gold with your Lodge Emblem or Army, Navy, Marine or Air Corps Insignia and Name at this sensational low price. This smart Leather Billfold must actually be seen to be fully appreciated Besides the spacious compartment at the back which can be used for currency, checks, papers, etc., it has 4 pockets, each protected by celluloid to prevent the soiling of your valuable membership and credit cards. This handsome Billfold has the sturdy appearance and style usually found in much costlier Billfolds

● Due to difficulty in obtaining good leather because of war conditions, the supply of these Billfolds is limited. Remember, you get **3 Big Values for only $1.49.** So rush your order today! If after receiving your Engraved Billfold, you don't positively agree that this is the most outstanding bargain you ever came across, return it and we'll refund your money.

YOU GET THIS! Your choice of Emblems and your Name richly Engraved in 23k Gold on the Face of the Billfold. Your name is also engraved in Gold, inside the Billfold.

Your Favorite Emblem Here

Your Full Name Here

3-Color Identification Plate

Beautifully Engraved with your Name, Address and Social Security Number **49¢**

For only 49c extra, we send you this beautiful specially designed 3-color Emergency Identification Plate, on which we engrave your Social Security Number, your Name and your Address This plate fits perfectly into your Billfold and becomes a perfect identification record for all time to come. Get this Identification Plate with your Billfold

IMPORTANT SAVING: C.O.D. Postal rates were materially increased under the new Revenue Act. C.O.D. Postage and Money Order Fees would cost you an additional 39c if we were to ship your Billfold C.O.D. You can save this amount by sending a check or Money Order in advance. We will then prepay all postage charges. Order now.

SEND MONEY WITH YOUR ORDER AND SAVE 39c PARCEL POST and C.O.D. FEE!

ILLINOIS MERCHANDISE MART, Dept. 5007
500 N. Dearborn St., Chicago 10, Ill.

If you want a LODGE, ARMY, or NAVY INSIGNIA, state name here.....

☐ Gentlemen: I enclose $1.49 plus new 20% Federal Tax (only 30c—total $1.79) Please send me a Smart Leather Billfold with my name and favorite Emblem engraved in 23k Gold

☐ I enclose an additional 49c ($2.28 in all) Please include the 3 color Emergency Identification Plate. Engrave the plate with the information given on the coupon below

MY FULL NAME..... (PLEASE PRINT CLEARLY)

ADDRESS.....

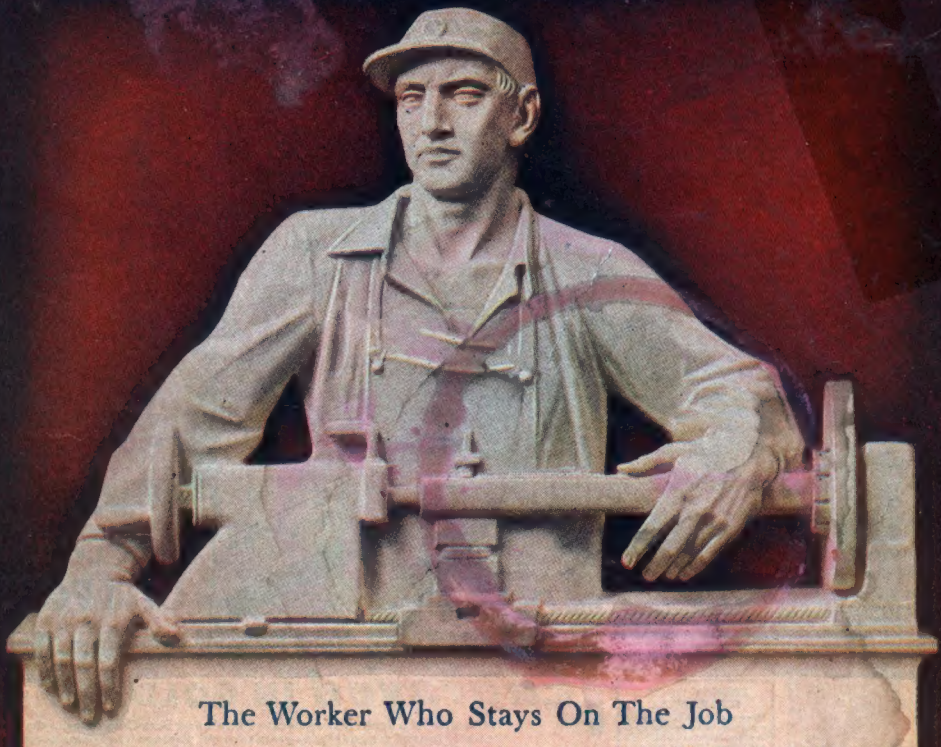
CITY..... STATE.....

☐ Check here if you want us to ship Billfold C.O.D. for $1.49 plus new 20% Federal Tax, postage and C.O.D. charges. ● Social Security Number.....

☐ Check here if you also want to get an Engraved Identification Plate C.O.D. for 49c plus postage.

IMPORTANT: C.O.D. Postal rates were materially increased under the new Revenue Act. C.O.D. Postage and Money Order Fees would cost you an additional 39c if we were to ship your Billfold C.O.D. Save this amount by sending a Check or Money Order in advance. We will then prepay all postal charges. Remember: — We guarantee satisfaction or MONEY BACK

SALUTE TO A CLEAR-HEADED AMERICAN



The Worker Who Stays On The Job

He knows that minutes count.
Each one is precious to himself—
But precious more
To those who fight, and bleed, and die.

Minutes in which another turning
of the wheel...
Another weapon fashioned...
Another shell made ready for its task...
Can tip the balance of some far-off battle
Not yet fought...
And make the Victory certain—
Where it is only hoped for now.

He stays. Day upon day, he stays
and meets the test...
With purpose clear...and with sense
of honored duty well performed.
He is a Clear-Headed American.

☆ ☆ ☆ ☆ ☆ ☆ ☆

Published in the interest of the home front war effort...by the makers of Calvert

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